LOS MACHETEROS

The Wells Fargo Robbery and the Violent Struggle for Puerto Rican Independence

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PROLOGUE: *The Arrests*

AS ONE SET of FBI agents impounded what they knew to be a Donald Duck cassette, another set ducked the spray of bullets coming from an Uzi machine gun. As one team of camouflaged officers stormed in on a suspect and literally caught him with his pants down, another made a ten-year-old boy go to the bathroom with an agent at his side and a shotgun at his head.

It was war. More precisely, it was August 30, 1985: The day two hundred FBI agents silently swooped down on Public Enemy Number One—Los Macheteros, the machete wielders of Puerto Rico.

In the 1950s Communists supposedly posed the gravest threat to the domestic security of the United States. But by the late 1970s, the FBI claimed that Marxists and Maoists had taken a back seat to a wide variety of Puerto Rican nationalists. These groups wanted independence yesterday, they publicly advocated violence, and they boasted to the press about the success of their revolutionary activities.

In light of this publicity, the FBI looked ineffectual. However, agents had been quietly tracking the "terrorists" for years. Now, after months of careful planning, they were finally arresting members of *Los Macheteros (The Machete Wielders)*, by far the most successful and dangerous of the independence groups. Employing techniques that they hoped would avoid any injuries, agents simultaneously moved on thirty separate locations. The FBI had invested too many man hours to simply kill Macheteros. Better to grab them alive, clamp them in jail, and use their trial (and punishment) as a well-publicized deterrent to future revolutionary activity.

Wherever necessary, the FBI used SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams as part of a strategy that had worked well in other mass busts, such as that of the Hells Angels in Connecticut. Wearing camouflaged uniforms, bulletproof vests, and even camouflage paint, agents from all across the United States assembled

before daylight at FBI headquarters in San Juan. There they received instructions and detailed briefings about the locations and characters of the persons they would soon try to arrest. According to Special-Agent-in-Charge Alonzo ("Lon") Lacey, the idea was to nab people before they had a chance to resist. Let the agents know exactly what they were up against and put them on location when their targets were still in bed. With the right combination of luck, skill, and education, the FBI would round up the revolutionaries before they could wipe the sleep from their eyes.

Because this was Puerto Rico, part of but not part of the United States, the FBI consciously opened itself to charges of abuse of power when it failed to notify local authorities about the impending arrests. With closet nationalists behind so many Puerto Rican government desks, agents understandably argued that to tell the locals was to tell Los Macheteros. Nevertheless, given the island's peculiar political status—in theory a self-governing Commonwealth, in reality a congressionally controlled possession—proceeding with the operation without warning made the local authorities look silly. They could not claim to be in control with the FBI taking charge of a decidedly Puerto Rican problem. Minutes after the arrests became public, locals would inevitably charge the bureau with police-state tactics. Not only did the FBI embarrass local authorities, they built their case on evidence obtained through bugs—public telephones included—even though the supposedly sacrosanct Puerto Rican constitution expressly prohibits wiretapping.

Didn't the unannounced presence of the electronically equipped agents prove that Los Macheteros were right all along? Didn't the arrests demonstrate that Puerto Rico was nothing more than a federally governed colony of the United States?

More worried about their own lives than about politics, agents positioned themselves for assaults on houses and apartments all over the island. From Carolina to Caguas, from Bayamón to Vega Baja, from Luquillo to Guaynado, agents knocked on doors, showed no warrants, and whenever possible, literally took people from their beds. At Norman Ramirez's house, a family member opened the door, agents marched into the bedroom, and Norman found himself in cuffs before he could resist. In Caguas, Elias Castro refused to let the agents in, so they kicked down the door. Within seconds, Elias was cuffed and, like his comrades in house after house, carted off to the Federal Building for processing.

At the home of lawyer Roberto Maldonado, masked agents broke down the door. Under orders to grab everything in sight, they searched not only Maldonado's papers but also those of his poetess wife. Her poem about nuclear bombs led an agent to declare, "That's the stuff," as he confiscated the draft of an unfinished novel, a new book of poems, and fifty cassettes of interviews with leading Puerto Rican cultural figures.

The only serious trouble came at the Luquillo home of Filiberto Ojeda Rios. A fifty-three-year-old man of great dignity and pride, Ojeda fiercely resisted the idea that any American had legitimate authority over any Puerto Rican. In an envelope labeled "Bible," he kept a military manual for light tank weapons in his bedroom—when agents knocked on Ojeda's apartment door, he predictably refused to let them in. Agents knew this guy meant business. Wisely, they decided not to break down Ojeda's door, turning to the phone instead. Ojeda's wife explained that the door would remain shut. When agents started climbing the stairs to Ojeda's apartment, he opened fire with a machine gun. The idea was to scare off the agents, but as bullets sprayed the wall, one ricocheted squarely into an agent's eye, blinding it.

Ojeda knew he eventually had to give in or die. But his bullets temporarily kept the FBI at bay while he burned documents that might or might not incriminate him in illegal activity. Once he had a tub full of ashes, Ojeda came out of the apartment house with an Uzi in one hand and a pistol in the other. Showing what agent Dick Farley called "incredible restraint," agents put aside their desire to revenge their injured colleague. A sharpshooter from the Hostage Rescue Team (another unit specially trained for crisis situations) managed to hit the Uzi instead of Ojeda. The FBI meant to convict each and every Machetero in a mainland court of law.

The charges? Since the FBI called Los Macheteros terrorists, the reporters camped out at San Juan's Federal Building expected to hear indictments for murder, bombings, treason (Puerto Ricans are American citizens), or a plot to assassinate President Ronald Reagan.

The charges should have been openly political, but instead of revolution, the twelve alleged Macheteros were indicted for their supposed complicity in the second largest bank robbery in American history. The government charged that when, on September 12, 1983, a young Puerto Rican named Victor Gerena took

1,150 pounds of cash ($7.1 million) from Wells Fargo's West Hartford, Connecticut, vaults, he had not acted alone. Cops still in search of a solution had to drop their Lone Ranger theories, because the indictments said that Gerena—code name *Aquila* (Eagle)—was a Machetero. While living in Connecticut, he'd received his orders from Puerto Rico, and the loot, instead of financing the good life in Rio de Janeiro, would fund the Puerto Rican independence movement.

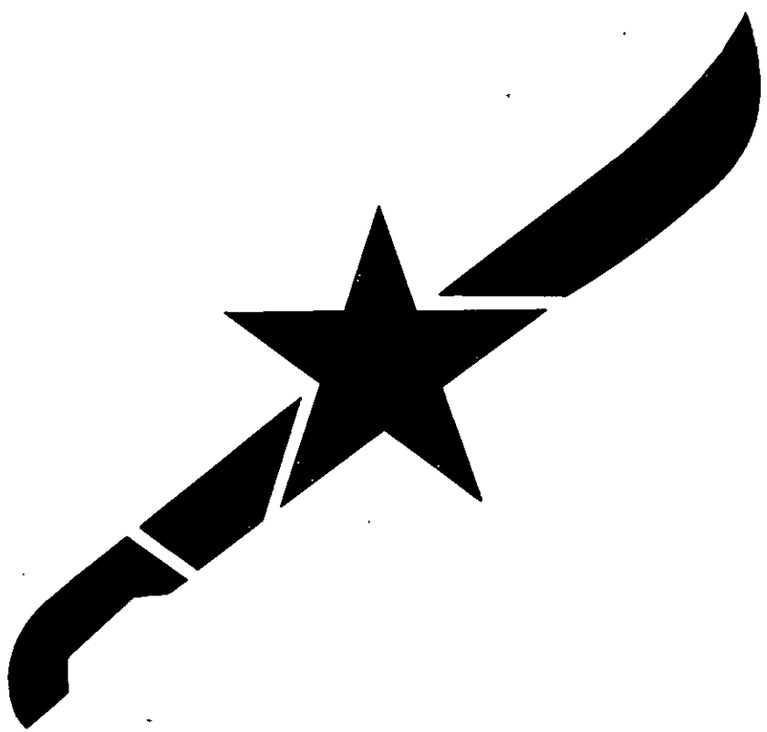
That's what the prosecutors contended. Using the government's indictments of August 30, 1985, as a point of departure, this book chronicles:

The story of a robbery that turned into an expropriation.

The story of a college drop-out who was secretly a revolutionary.

The story of a group of Puerto Ricans who call themselves freedom fighters but are labeled terrorists by the FBI.

And, finally, the story of an island that, handled ignorantly, could easily become America's Northern Ireland.



The symbol that appears on underground publications of Los Macheteros.

1

The Robbery

WEST HARTFORD is a city of extremes. Near lofty Mountain Road $300,000 and $400,000 homes are commonplace. In summer Chem Lawn trucks keep the area green, in winter service-station jeeps keep it plowed, and all year round Mercedes and Porsches, Audis and Volvos take the men to work and the children to gymnastics or lacrosse.

Driving over to Park Road, the other side of the tracks, lush landscapes make way for asphalt, congestion, and discount stores. Bazilian's boasts jeans at rock-bottom prices, Rent Anything offers trucks scrapped by U-Haul, and a no-brand gas station offers fuel to those who will pay before they pump.

Across Park Road, in the Elmwood section, the large factories owned by Colt's and Chandler Evans stamp out their wares near avenues that resemble the Las Vegas strip. In Elmwood, glaring signs and brassy billboards dominate streets where stores are sandwiched one on top of another. Cars, trucks, meat, furniture: Everything's for sale, including drugs, peddled by dealers who roam the streets near the Culbro Industrial Park, home to Wiesen Glass, National Safe, and Wells Fargo Armored Services.

On the eastern tip of West Hartford, the park originally served as a barracks for Connecticut's tobacco workers. Recruited in Puerto Rico, men and women slept near the company storehouses, were driven to the fields on company buses, and returned to Puerto Rico or New York when the tobacco industry no longer needed their services. By 1970, with the early-twentieth-century heyday of Connecticut tobacco a distant memory, developers turned the land into a fenced enclosure for business. Erecting rows of long, low, lifeless buildings, they created an environment as unsuitable for people as it was ideal for a security company. Who would guess that on a concrete slab surrounded by poverty Wells Fargo sometimes stored more than $30 million in cash?

Since few West Hartford residents knew that Wells Fargo had

a vault in town, camouflaging cash with industrial ugliness proved to be a successful deterrent to crime. As an added security device, Wells Fargo relied on a legendary reputation dating back to the days when lawmen like Wyatt Earp fought it out at the O.K. Corral—and won. Henry Wells and William Fargo became business associates in Wells and Company in 1845, competing with the federal government's postal operations. They were successful, but when the government responded by charging less than cost to mail a letter, Wells and Fargo banded together with their competitors to form American Express in 1850. Once again they succeeded, only to meet internal opposition when they asked their board of directors to try for a share of the delivery business generated by the California gold rush. When American Express refused to expand, Wells and Fargo in 1852 formed the company that still bears their name. They were successful at transporting large amounts of money under the most hazardous conditions, and the name Wells Fargo eventually became synonymous with tanklike security. Insiders knew the truth, but in the armored delivery business, illusion could be as important as reality. If thieves believed Wells Fargo was unassailable, they would not try to break the bank. Like most Americans, thieves could be handcuffed by a legend polished up every time a cowboy movie glorified the Old West.

If location and reputation kept most criminals at bay, Wells Fargo still worried about the bold few who might want to give themselves a role in a modern legend. Since desperate men might try anything, Wells Fargo, in order to create a literal fortress, spent substantial sums installing the finest physical security imaginable. Bulletproof windows, dotted with gun turrets, were set in walls thick enough for a bomb shelter. Garage doors could be opened only from the inside, with the controls separated from the loading docks by two huge doors that protected vault guards from any unwanted visitors. Even incoming truck guards entered a caged enclosure that was opened only when vault personnel felt certain that no danger lurked outside. And, throughout the building, Wells Fargo positioned silent alarms, connected to a security service and the West Hartford police. At any sign of trouble, the police justifiably bragged they would be there within three minutes.

The hole in Wells Fargo's operation was management's reaction to competition: They didn't like having to spend money to

meet it. If executives publicly cheered when President Reagan broadcast speeches extolling the beneficial effects of strong competition, in private they cursed the government's partial deregulation of their industry. Annual reports complained that competition not only put "downward" pressure on rates; it meant that business growth "was mostly a function of new market penetration." With so many other armored cars on the streets, you couldn't make a buck in an established location. Opening new offices meant substantial start-up costs—those bulletproof windows and gun turrets came with high price tags —which, given the intense competition, you were "unlikely to fully recapture."

Competition killed profits and made management's life miserable. In 1983 Wells Fargo was owned by Baker Industries, itself a part of Borg-Warner, a conglomerate that sold insurance, manufactured automobile transmissions, and invested in real estate developments. Corporate headquarters sympathized with the plight of Wells Fargo executives, but managers who wanted promotions knew that red was not a Borg-Warner color. Since good executives somehow turned the bottom line black, many Wells Fargo managers, in an effort to satisfy higher-ups, cut costs by paying custodial personnel as little as the guard market would bear. To oversee $30 million in West Hartford, the company payed $4.75 an hour. In West Springfield, Massachusetts, Wells Fargo did even better, because in that state guards worked for $4.25 an hour. With millions in its vaults and a fortune spent on its physical plant, Wells Fargo manned its everyday operations with anyone they could convince to work for peanuts.

Who worked for close to minimum wage? Kids did. And not many of them at that. Since managers often had a hard time finding enough guards to man the trucks, they couldn't be particular about the few applicants who came their way, despite explicit regulations to the contrary. A candidate for a job might be a kid fresh out of high school with no future in mind, or a young man bored by college yet uncertain about what he really wanted to do, or one who listlessly moved from one dead-end job to another. What did it matter to branch managers under pressure from regional managers under pressure from corporate headquarters? With orders to hire part-time if possible—the company extended no fringe benefits to part-time help—branch managers settled for what they could get, checked references if they had

the time, and hoped that no criminal ever noticed the personnel hole in Wells Fargo Armored Services.

What professionals missed was obvious to the guards: Wells Fargo had such a casual attitude toward its customers' money that a $25,000 loss could appear on monthly reports as an MD, a miscellaneous deduction. In Colorado Springs, the branch manager took "a lady friend and her children" for a tour of the vault, and messenger guards came in to check on their money unaccompanied by the vault custodian, who was such a pleasant fellow that he also allowed a friend to tour the vault. Later, when it was discovered that $22,500 was missing, Wells Fargo learned that "Mr. Allan Smith, the friend of the vault custodian, had been spending substantial sums of money."

In Philadelphia, ACME supermarkets wanted to know what had happened to $10,002.45 that was missing. When guards left the store, they had had six bags of money, but Wells Fargo credited only five to ACME's account. After an immediate search of the Philadelphia branch failed to locate the cash, Wells Fargo concluded that "either the deposit was lost after it was picked up, or the messenger/guard was the victim of an ACME employee when he signed a receipt for six items but received only five." Who knew the truth? Wells Fargo simply chalked up another miscellaneous deduction by concluding that the guard, hired a week before the ACME incident, "was a very inexperienced employee." He would certainly receive disciplinary action.

Toronto officials of the company foiled a robbery when they stopped a former guard, "then out on bail on charges of breaking and entering plus fraud," from obtaining the Wells Fargo uniforms needed for a planned heist. In Atlanta another $1.5 million was lost in transit. Apparently in a rush to do a good job, eager employees had somehow dropped the money "behind a sorting table in the air courier control room." Measures were taken immediately to prevent a recurrence of this type of incident, but Wells Fargo executives included the Atlanta incident in a monthly report to line personnel to show "what does, in fact, happen occasionally with missing items."

Despite its policies and practices, Wells Fargo was in luck when it made Jim McKeon manager of its West Hartford branch. Twenty-four years old and eager to use Wells Fargo as a stepping stone to a career in police work, Jim was bright, conscientious,

responsible, and completely undaunted by the long hours the armored services division demanded of its full-time personnel. Jim thrived on hard work, so Wells Fargo did its best to make its new man happy: McKeon was asked to work long, long hours.

When Jim took the manager's job in November 1982, his experience at Wells Fargo totaled five months, his formal training five minutes. Indeed, even though he had reluctantly decided to accept for the time being Wells Fargo's penny-pinching policies, Jim was surprised by his initiation into the world of security management. After giving him the job, Jim's regional boss picked up a book of Wells Fargo's rules and regulations, tossed it to Jim, and told him to read it. When he had done so, McKeon would be a self-taught manager, qualified according to the company's informal standards to oversee everything from gassing up the trucks, to tallying up the millions in the vault, to buying toilet paper for the branch's bathroom.

With too many responsibilities, no help or praise from managers higher up in the organization, and the daily grind of a schedule packed with endless big and small stops, Jim McKeon eventually developed a new perspective on his job. Guard duty had always been a way station on the road to police work, but cynicism slowly crept into his attitude after Jim became another hassled member of Wells Fargo's managerial team. To stay sane, Jim decided "It's only a job. I mean just to hire somebody, if you went through all the steps, there was no time for work." On paper, the precise regulations made sense; on the job, they produced sneers and ridicule. Jim and his men started to believe that Wells Fargo had created the rules merely as a shield against its insurance companies. When a loss occurred, Wells Fargo could blame its incompetent staff; if guards had only followed company policies, the money would still be in the vault.

Jim's attitude would later have dramatic consequences for Wells Fargo. In trying to decide whether to save his life or to risk it in an attempt to save Wells Fargo's money, Jim had an easy choice: The job wasn't worth it. But that came later. In late 1982 and early 1983, Jim McKeon found that the only way to get the job done was to cut corners. Nothing extraordinary, just the many little things that made everyday insanity that much easier to bear. If the "regs" said to do all paperwork before leaving at night, Jim might lock his funds in the vault, leave for a slice of fun with friends, and return at dawn to start and complete yester-

day's paperwork. Or if a truck was supposed to have three guards, Jim might let it leave with two. What could he do if nobody wanted to work? Or if he needed to leave the depot for a while, Jim might not phone the alarm company. Since calls wasted more minutes than they were worth, Jim sometimes failed to turn on the efficient security system. This was an obvious risk but not a big one since only Jim knew nobody was watching the money.

McKeon's need to bend or overlook the rules meshed perfectly with his personality. He's such a pleasant person—the kind other men call "a helluva nice guy"—that Jim sometimes let his subordinates forget Wells Fargo's "Mickey Mouse" regulations. As long as a guard acted responsibly by showing up for work and efficiently performing his duties, Jim gave him a great deal of leeway. His bottom line was getting the money from one spot to another; how guys did it was, within broad limits, their own business.

Although McKeon showed his easygoing side to everyone, it was perhaps most apparent when he dealt with his second-in-command, twenty-five-year-old Victor Gerena. Technically Victor should have had Jim's job. He'd started at Wells Fargo a month before Jim, in May 1982. He was as bright as just-polished brass, and in Jim's mind, Victor had deserved the promotion as much as he did. Jim guessed Victor didn't get the manager's job because he was Puerto Rican. The idea of a young Hispanic running the security company rubbed somebody the wrong way, and Jim stepped into his new job with feelings of guilt. He harbored no prejudices, but he felt like apologizing for those who did.

Besides, Victor was a generous guy. He didn't have much, but what he had he shared. Jim, flat broke his first day on the job, said he wasn't hungry when Victor went into a Hamburger Heaven to pick up everybody's lunch. Victor knew he was fibbing and bought Jim a couple of superburgers and fries. There was no mention of money until Jim repaid Victor the next week, and even then Victor brushed off Jim's thank you.

Jim never forgot this spontaneous gesture, especially after Victor reluctantly explained his situation. His ex-wife and his ex-lover, in need of money to help feed his two daughters, had both taken him to court for child support. Victor was working long hours at Wells Fargo's puny wages only to lose a healthy

chunk of his pay to the past. Victor had nothing, not even America's mandatory car, so Jim sometimes let Victor drive a company vehicle home. In return for the wheels, Victor would give Jim a can of beer, a small if significant way of cementing a friendship that never went beyond Wells Fargo's depot.

Differences in backgrounds and interests partially explain why Victor never developed close friendships at the company. Coworkers found that Victor refused to let anyone penetrate the walls he had built around himself. Locked in a truck for eight hours, Victor was capable of total silence: not a word for long distances, except what was needed to get the job done. After a few trips, the other guards knew what they were in for. Victor spoke when he was spoken to, but they didn't expect much more unless he saw a pretty woman on the street. Then, just like the other guards, Victor used the positioning of the hours on a clock to point out an appealing body: "Three o'clock," "Six o'clock." The time didn't matter. As long as it was a pretty woman, Victor woke up.

Victor hated his job, so much so that it was one of the few things he talked about. Wells Fargo liked it when he worked fifty to sixty hours a week, and they even trusted him with one of two keys to the vault, but they still refused him the full-time job that would have brought a measure of financial security to his life. Victor was "angry" and also "scared" about the millions he and the other guards carried all over New England. Somebody was sure to try to rip them off and gun-toting Victor would be in the middle of it, and for what? The company treated him as if he were expendable baggage.

No matter how he felt, Victor showed up for work. But like the other guards, he couldn't help wondering about all that money. It was impossible to toss around packets compressed as tightly as a deck of cards, knowing that this handful contained $400,000—used twenty-dollar bills came twenty thousand to the packet—and not daydream about your turn at the wheel of fortune. Some guys said they'd go to Europe, others said the Caribbean, and Victor chose Mexico. It wasn't anything original; the guards chatter was only idle speculation. Nobody took it seriously.

Routine dulls the senses. You get out of bed, you use coffee to wind yourself up, you go to work, you come home, you watch

television, you go to sleep, and you wake up again. Routine guides us so predictably that we eventually take our environment, ourselves, and our colleagues for granted.

That's what happened at Wells Fargo. Through the first eight months of 1983, Jim McKeon successfully squeezed so many stops into the course of a day, he had neither time nor reason to question his methods. The home office in Atlanta seemed happy, his own boss wanted only the bottom-line results, and except for a few customers God couldn't satisfy, Jim had little trouble with the banks and restaurants who used his armored services. When it came to staff, Jim felt so good about Victor ("He was the only guy I could trust") that he had neither cause nor inclination to question his activities. On the contrary, one of Jim's biggest fears was that Victor would quit, leaving him literally holding the bags.

The two blips in this otherwise stable picture were soon eliminated. In early 1983, Jim learned that Victor might have to be fired. His ex-wife and ex-lover had each attached his pay in two separate procedures, and the second attachment had triggered a response from the home-office computer. Wells Fargo policy stipulated that no guard could work with two attachments on his wages. Such a person might be so desperate for money that he could not resist the daily temptations offered by Wells Fargo and its customers. Jim, anxious to keep Victor, got approval from his boss to give their troubled guard a morning off. That gave Victor time to successfully convince Connecticut's labor department to combine his attachments, which guaranteed that Wells Fargo's payroll computer would now register only one garnishment on guard Gerena's wages. Victor's job was saved because, despite his difficult and desperate situation, he was the only guard Jim McKeon could trust.

In June 1983, that trust was momentarily shaken. When $20,000 was missing from a run Victor captained, he and the other guards were, quite naturally, suspected of stealing the money. However, following Wells Fargo's normal procedures, the loss was never reported to the police. Guards were asked to take lie detector tests. Even though Victor readily agreed, he was nervous when Jim McKeon came to tell him the technician had arrived. "This is it, huh?" Jim nodded, Victor nervously lit up a cigarette, and he went on to pass the test with flying colors. The technician did say that Victor lied about drugs—maybe he'd smoked a little pot—and maybe he'd taken some company supplies home, but Victor was clean on the key issue, the $20,000.

Even though he passed the polygraph, Victor received a three-day suspension from Wells Fargo. Officials said the $20,000 was lost because, despite orders that he alone move the five hundred bags of coin and the fifty bags of currency on his route, Victor had gotten help from the other guards on his truck. According to company regulations, neither of these men was ever to offer the money guard—Victor—any assistance. The guy riding shotgun could leave the truck to oversee Victor's transfer of the funds, but not only was the guard doing the driving never to help carry money, he was never permitted—under any circumstances—even to leave the truck.

As usual, regulations that made sense on paper were nonsense on the street. Transferring so much money alone, Victor had no chance of making all his stops on time. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, but the home office, despite understanding his predicament, still demanded disciplinary action. Jim McKeon complied by giving Victor a suspension that ran from Saturday through Monday. Since Victor never worked weekends, he lost only one day's pay, Jim lost his best man's services for only one series of stops, and Wells Fargo was satisfied that a careless employee had been properly disciplined.

With the $20,000 written off as another miscellaneous deduction, routine once again guided Jim McKeon and his men. They rehashed the loss for a week or so, but after that one run followed another with the regularity of clockwork and the excitement of stocking shelves. The job was a grind, made all the harder by the hot, muggy weather of August and early September.

About the only break in routine came on Mondays: Would Jim arrange to have Bridgeport's money picked up today or would he wait till Tuesday morning? Jim usually made his decision based on the number of men available, but whenever the run took place, it was a special nuisance. Once again the company manipulated personnel to save a few bucks. Since Bridgeport's guards were unionized, they earned roughly $8.00 an hour. But with the lower rate in West Hartford and the even lower rate in West Springfield, the company ordered West Springfield's men to pick up everybody's money at the Federal Reserve in Boston. After they brought it back to West Springfield, Jim's men picked it up and transported it to Bridgeport.

Although the trip was "a pain in the ass," Jim had no choice.

He booked the run, complained about the hassle, and filled his vault with astronomical sums whenever he elected for a Monday afternoon pickup. After all, by the time he got back to West Hartford, it was close to 6 P.M., and since that left no time for a trip to Bridgeport, many millions of dollars stayed overnight in West Hartford. Jim clearly understood the added risk but except for his men, nobody knew when the money was in the vault. Even then the final decision was often made by Jim on the spur of the moment.

On Monday, August 29, Jim was already on duty when Victor asked him for a special favor. He'd come to work in a friend's car, but he was afraid to leave it in the parking lot behind the Wells Fargo depot. Kids might vandalize the car, and that was sure to upset his friend, and just as sure to cost Victor money that he didn't have. Would Jim mind if Victor parked the car, a Chevy Malibu, in one of the bays reserved for armored trucks? There were five bays and with trucks on the road, ample space for Victor's car.

Jim hesitated because Wells Fargo regulations were explicit about private cars in the depot area: None were permitted. But this was Victor. He'd never brought a car to work before, and Jim understood his fears about vandalism: Cars had been taken apart in the back lot. Jim let Victor keep the Malibu under Wells Fargo's lock and key for the duration of his shift.

Later Jim learned that Victor had rented the Malibu shortly before coming to the depot. Using an outfit called Ugly Duckling Rent-a-Car—it was the only local firm that rented to people who lacked a major credit card—Victor apparently had brought the Malibu to work as a test. No matter how nice a guy Jim was, Victor couldn't bet that he would let him keep a car in the bay area. If not, Victor would have to alter his robbery plans. If so, Jim would think nothing of it when Victor brought another car on the day of the actual robbery.

Because Jim said yes, Victor was home free. He could park his getaway vehicle right beside the vault and no one would suspect a thing. It was just a friend's car in need of protection from the vandals and thieves who roamed the Culbro Industrial Park.

On Friday, September 9, Victor returned to Ugly Duckling Rent-a-Car. He wanted another car for Monday, but this time he needed a "full-size" vehicle. Brian Banks, the Ugly Duckling manager, said that that would be no problem if Victor took the

car for the weekend. Otherwise there was no assurance a full-size car would be available Monday morning. Victor immediately rented a 1978 Mercury Marquis. He drove it off the lot, and within hours, the car blew up! His robbery plans literally up in smoke, Victor called Ugly Duckling. They told him that the next morning a wrecker would come to pick up the Marquis, and if Victor was standing by the car, he could get a ride back to the lot.

Victor agreed, but what about another full-size car? Ugly Duckling said it would come through, and, sure enough, the next morning Victor drove off in a 1973 Buick Le Sabre. He had to feel shaky about his wheels, but for renters without credit cards, Ugly Duckling had the only getaway cars in town.

Through a busy weekend, Victor used the Buick sparingly. He and his fiancée Liza Soto drove it to an Italian festival in town, they used it in shopping for a family dinner party on Sunday night, and Monday, on the way to Wells Fargo, Victor dropped Liza off at city hall. After two years of living together, she and Victor had finally set the date. They would be married Friday, as long as city hall processed their marriage license in time.

Victor got to work about 11 A.M. but along with another guard, twenty-one-year-old Tim Girard, he was locked out. Since Jim McKeon, who had the only set of keys to the depot, was nowhere to be found, Victor and Tim twiddled their thumbs till the boss returned. He arrived in a few minutes explaining that his normal shortage of men had forced him to return home for help. The evening before, Jim had let a buddy crash at his apartment, and now Jim wanted the favor returned with a day's work at Wells Fargo. His friend and regular employee, Bob Shewokis, sleepily agreed, and Jim had him in tow when he opened the doors for another harried day.

Victor told Jim the Buick in the parking lot belonged to a friend who would be just as angry as his pal with the Malibu if anything happened to the car. Could he put the Buick in bay five, at the very end of the Wells Fargo loading dock? Jim agreed, only to have Tim Girard make the same request for his car. Jim wanted to say no ("This car business was getting out of hand"), but what could he do? He let Tim park in bay four, regretting all the while that he'd ever said yes to Victor or anyone else.

About noon Victor and Tim left for the day. They had a long route that took them from West Hartford to Bridgeport and back

again. If they wanted to get off by nine that night, they would have to hustle. Meanwhile, Jim helped Bob Shewokis in the vault, did some of his paperwork, and tried to figure out what to do about West Springfield. Tuesday would be another stop-filled day, which meant he should get Bridgeport's money as soon as possible. But how could he do it with only Bob as his assistant? Regulations stipulated that three guards ride in any truck and as if that wasn't difficult enough to arrange, everybody on the truck had to be armed. Bob had no gun permit and thus had no business on a Wells Fargo truck.

Jim decided to chance it. Locking up the empty depot, he and Shewokis left for West Springfield at about 6 P.M. There they loaded twenty-six bags of currency into an armored truck and started home with a load that totaled $4,970,000. Most of the money was in the form of used bills of small denominations, and at the time Jim thought nothing of it. Like a doctor in an operating room or a nurse in a pain-filled ward, Jim had learned to block out reality. Bags of currency were tossed about with the respect that might be given to sacks of garbage, and millions piled high on a large dolly became a "skid ready for loading." To get the job done, Jim generally managed to forget that his average load would constitute a fortune for most people.

On the way back to West Hartford, Jim took by far his biggest risks of the day. One was to help his mother. She had called from her job to see if Jim could stop at her home in Windsor on the way back from Massachusetts: She thought she'd left her glasses there. Ever the nice guy, Jim did so, but he did not find the glasses. Luckily for Victor, nobody noticed the unguarded $5 million parked in Mrs. McKeon's Robin Road driveway.

Once they climbed back into the truck, Jim immediately kept a promise he'd made to Bob Shewokis: He dropped him off around the corner from his mom's house and returned, all alone, to the depot. Jim knew this was, to say the least, against company policy, but the night before Bob had left his car at a baseball game played at Windsor's Kennedy Field. Jim, to get Bob to work, had promised to drive him back to the car and if that left Jim alone with the cash, whose fault was that? If Wells Fargo paid decent wages, Jim wouldn't have to Mickey Mouse every pickup on his routes. As it was, Jim had needed Bob today, and, if he wanted Shewokis when the next personnel emergency arose, had to make good on his promise. At roughly 8 P.M., he dropped Bob off

at Windsor's Diana Road and, with some fear and trepidation, took off alone for West Hartford. Fifteen minutes later he was back at the depot. Blocked by the garage doors that opened only from the inside, Jim left the truck on idle, rushed in to open the garage, and, just as quickly, rushed out to speed the truck inside.

It was a chilling prospect to Jim, $5 million on idle with nobody watching it, but he felt better once the money was behind closed doors. Now there was no chance the cash would be lost.

Jim quickly unloaded all twenty-six bags of currency, but he was unable to put it in Wells Fargo's safe. In his rush to get to Massachusetts, Jim had locked the vault rather than waste time calling the alarm service. Now, to store his funds, Jim had to wait until Victor arrived because he had the second key of the two needed to open the huge vault.

Anxious to get home after what was already a twelve-hour day, Jim decided to prod Tim and Victor. Using a radio system connected to every Wells Fargo truck, Jim asked about their estimated time of arrival. Tim told him they were close to home, with only one stop to go, the Smuggler's Inn Restaurant. As long as the Inn had its deposit ready, Jim could figure they would be home in half an hour. Eager to leave, Jim didn't like what he heard. He kiddingly told Tim and Victor that "they'd meet a very upset man if they didn't get there before nine o'clock." Jim had made plans to watch Monday night football with friends, and he had no intention of missing what promised to be a great game.

When they got to the Smuggler's Inn, Victor quickly went in for the money, but someone had made a mistake counting the funds. Victor said no problem and patiently waited while the deposit was checked and rechecked. Finally the money was ready to go, and with one last stop at Dunkin Donuts for a Coke, Tim and Victor pulled in at 9:07. Looking back, Jim was sure of the time because he remembered angrily imagining the football game starting without him.

Since all the bays were full, Tim asked if he should move his car. Jim said yes, Victor backed the truck in as Tim pulled out, and even though Victor told him to go home, Tim decided to help unload the truck. Since once before Jim had lectured him for leaving too quickly, Tim decided he would give McKeon no cause for additional aggravation. It was already clear that Jim wanted to go home the minute the trucks were unloaded.

As soon as Tim opened the truck's rear door, Victor started to

unload the money by himself. He told Jim that he'd tried to call him from Bridgeport, but that nobody answered the phone. "I assumed you went to Springfield." Jim nodded yes, explaining that the funds collected in Massachusetts were still on carrying carts. Victor should help open the vault because the sooner he did so, the sooner they could all head for home.

Ten minutes later, about 9:20, the truck was unloaded and the $5 million safely in the vault. On any other night, Tim would have left at once, but evening construction had the eastbound highway backed up. Did anybody know another way home? Jim said he did, although the route was confusing. If Tim waited till he got a "bulk count" of Victor's money, Jim, on his way home, would guide Tim through downtown Hartford.

With Tim catnapping on one side of the vault room, Jim sat down on the other to complete his paperwork. Victor, standing in front of the doors that led to the loading dock, walked behind Jim and told him to be careful with his gun. It was falling out of his holster. That didn't surprise Jim because the holster, which belonged to Victor, had several loose threads. Jim had been meaning to fix it but somehow never got around to it. Now he would be sure to sew it properly or, better yet, ask Victor to return the holster he had borrowed.

After helping Jim with his gun—perhaps Victor was nervous, perhaps it was an exercise to help him get ready for what followed—Victor walked back to the loading dock doors, took a sip of his soda, came back across the room, and began the largest single-handed robbery in American history. He moved behind the seated, preoccupied McKeon, took the still-loose gun from his holster, and in a voice Jim had never heard before ("He sounded like a Mexican bandido. It was the tone of voice he'd use in a street fight in Hartford"), Victor made it clear this was no joke. "I'm not fucking around, man. Move and I'll put a bullet in your head."

Jim tried to keep calm. Since that was impossible, he settled for obeying orders. Seated, and with his back to a man who pressed a gun against his skull, Jim saw no way to be a hero—and live.

On the other side of the room, Tim thought "it was a prank." He'd had his head down, trying to catch a few winks, when he opened his eyes to Victor pointing a gun at Jim's head. He didn't think it was funny, but as Jim's "face got all red," he also realized

it was no joke. Almost instinctively, Tim reached for his gun, only to be stopped by a request from his boss.

Jim, closely watching Tim's reaction, feared for a confrontation that would make him "monkey in the middle." With a gun to his head, and Tim threatening to pull one on Victor, Jim McKeon had no doubt who would be the robbery's first casualty. He asked Tim to "drop his gun," and Victor underlined this request by cocking the .38. Now Jim's fate, a minute ago in Victor's hands, was about to be decided by twenty-one-year-old Tim Girard.

For a few agonizingly long seconds, Tim hesitated. He seemed ready to risk his and Jim's lives for Wells Fargo's money. But he soon realized this was not a John Wayne movie. Victor had a real .38 pointed at his friend's head. Tim had no doubt Victor would use it, and just as important as Jim's life was his own. Could he draw his gun faster than Victor could kill Jim and turn on him? John Wayne would have tried anything. Tim Girard wisely chose to do nothing. He resigned himself to reality, and obeying Victor's agitated commands ("The man seemed mad when he was doing the robbery") Tim Girard laid down on the floor.

Jim, feeling he now had a new, if still temporary, lease on life, put his hands behind his back while Victor slipped on a pair of handcuffs. These effectively immobilized Jim, but Victor angrily told him to join Tim on the floor and wait his turn to be bound and gagged.

As Victor tied Girard's hands, first with rope and then with tape, Tim resisted. He wasn't so much trying to escape as to take out his anger on a guy who had him quite pissed off. Victor would have none of it. He slapped Girard around, announced once again that he wasn't "fucking around," and, to prove his point, not only put tape over Tim's mouth but made a noose, put it around Tim's neck, and then firmly tied the rope around his prisoner's legs.

Later, when the two guards "reminisced" about the robbery, the "rope part" stuck out. Jim McKeon and Tim Girard were "scared shitless," and despite Victor's open apology to each man ("I've got nothing against you. I'm just tired of working for other people"), neither guard forgot Victor's words when he finished hog-tying Tim Girard: "Now! Move and you'll strangle yourself."

Victor repeated the tape routine with Jim, but perhaps remembering McKeon's many kindnesses, perhaps satisfied that

handcuffs were better than rope, he let Jim off with loose-fitting bonds. Not surprisingly, Jim didn't feel grateful. He was too busy wondering if, like the armored guards recently murdered in Waterbury, he was about to be "wasted." And by his most trusted employee.

After covering each man's head with a jacket, Victor added one final, very dangerous touch. He told both guards they would be injected with a solution intended to produce "a drowsy feeling." Jim, leary that this was Victor's way of killing them, thought of asking to be spared, but with his mouth taped and his head covered, Jim had no way to communicate his fears. Nor did he have the opportunity. Victor, all business, lifted Jim's sleeve, punctured his arm, and checked on the one wild card in his otherwise perfectly planned robbery.

Many evenings Jim's friends would wait in the parking lot until he came out of work. Victor knew the routine, and despite Jim's openly expressed plans to get home for a football game, Victor checked Jim's story. Were any of his buddies coming to pick him up? When Jim mumbled no, Victor knew he was safely locked up with $7 million in cash. Nobody but friends ever came to Wells Fargo after 9 P.M., Victor could easily answer any phone calls, and even if Tim or Jim pressed one of the silent alarms, Victor would have no problems with the police.

In the past, alarms had been triggered on at least three occasions. West Hartford police, with the best response time in the state, immediately came to the bay doors but, usually, rather than going inside, they would be met by a guard who would come out to explain why the alarm buttons had been pressed. Thus, in the unlikely event of an alarm, all guard Gerena had to do was walk outside and tell police it was another false alarm. It's true that this part of the act would have demanded great discipline and poise, but as the last ten hours had proved, those were qualities Victor Gerena had in abundance.

With Jim supposedly on the way to sleep, Victor walked over to Tim and again slapped him around. Tim, choking from the tight bonds around his neck, had no choice about movement. He was only trying to find a position that allowed him to breathe with some measure of ease. Victor didn't care. He told the gasping Tim to "shut up" and injected him with the sleeping potion. At roughly 9:40, Victor Gerena started to "clean house" at Wells Fargo and Company.

The injections never worked. Victor probably had planned on the presence of one guard; for two, he cut the drug dosage in half. Whatever the reason—the drugs may have been past their prime—McKeon and Girard were wide awake throughout the robbery. They tried to "see with their ears," hoping that if they survived, they would have the clues police would need.

Before he could start moving money, Victor had to first move Jim, who acted as a six-foot, two-hundred-pound roadblock to the vault. Victor dragged Jim to the back of the vault room, under the buttons that opened the bay doors, and right beside the bulletproof gates that separated the loading dock from the $7 million. Initially Jim thought nothing of his new position; later it would provide one of the robbery's most tantalizing yet useless details.

With Jim on hold, Victor got to work. Using what were presumably duffel bags—both McKeon and Girard heard zippers being opened and closed—he entered the vault, ripped open the heavy, plastic bags that contained the money, and transferred the funds from the Federal Reserve's containers to his own. Since he was in no hurry, Victor slowly selected only the best merchandise. He took no coins, only $60,000 of uncirculated currency, and he was so careful he took all the bank bags with him. After the robbery the vault would be short on clues because Victor had been long on intelligence and careful planning.

The money was heavy, and Victor made several trips from the vault to the car. He would load up a cart, roll it through the vault room, and wheel it to his "full-size" getaway car. On one of these trips, McKeon heard Victor throw the car's spare tire and jack on the garage floor. Apparently even a Buick Le Sabre wasn't large enough to contain the ambitions of Victor Gerena.

Victor periodically checked the guards. He lifted the coats from their heads and pulled up their eyelids, evidently feeling he would know if they were feigning sleep. During one of these checks, Jim went too far; he actually started to snore when he heard Victor's approach. Victor may have believed him—more likely he was laughing—but in any event he let Jim continue his act. On another occasion, Victor noticed that Tim had changed positions; according to McKeon, "He said something like 'You can't fool me,' and hit Tim across the head." To Girard, "it felt like an open hand" and even though "it didn't really hurt that bad," it was yet another indication that Victor meant business.

Once Victor had stuffed Bridgeport's money into his car, he went back for more. Knowing that Jim normally kept a substantial sum in a storage bin inside the vault, he rifled Jim's desk and, with the keys to the bin in hand, opened a chest containing another $1.5 million in clean cash. All told, Victor soon had more than $7 million packed into his car, and the Buick must have scraped bottom with a load of cash weighing more than 1,150 pounds.

As Victor made one trip after another, Jim had an idea. If he waited till Victor was squeezing money into the car and then jumped up quickly, he might be able to shut the loading dock doors before Victor, caught by surprise, had a chance to stop him. If Jim succeeded, the bulletproof doors would protect him from Victor's gun, and the doors to the garage—which opened only from inside the vault room—would cage Victor until the police arrived. Even if Victor tried to drive through the doors, Jim would have cut Wells Fargo's losses, as he made it easier for the authorities to catch a thief who would, presumably, be speeding away from the scene of his crime.

It was a nice plan, except that Jim never used it. He feared that the bulletproof doors wouldn't work. Should he risk his life for Wells Fargo? Jim decided "the job wasn't worth it," and, with no more snoring in his act, he silently waited for Victor to end an ordeal that had already lasted an hour and a half.

Jim didn't have long to wait. Shortly before 11 P.M., Victor decided to call it a night, apparently because the Buick had no more room for money. He had tried to stuff even more loot into the Le Sabre but, finding no way to squeeze it in, Victor left one bank sack lying near his parking space and another two on the edge of the truck he and Tim had driven to Bridgeport. Since the sacks were uncut, police concluded that Victor had evidently said "the hell with them."

Just before he left, Victor did something that would make the police pursue him with extreme caution. He returned to the vault room and loaded not only another .38 revolver but a shotgun as well. Both McKeon and Girard heard the shells slide into position and Victor snapping the powerful gun in place. Later, some people would criticize authorities for overdramatizing Victor's dangerous intentions, but since he had a twelve-gauge shotgun in hand, the police understandably felt that Victor Gerena was armed, dangerous, and capable of murder.

Knowing that his ordeal was nearing an end, Jim McKeon tried to use his ears to see more clearly than ever. He heard Victor walk to the car and start the Buick, and he and Tim Girard then listened to two beeps of Victor's horn. In Jim's opinion, these were not inadvertent sounds; Victor did not accidentally hit the horn as he slipped behind the wheel. Jim distinctly heard "Beeeep! Beeeeep!" The sounds were deliberate and spaced far enough apart that to Jim they meant only one thing: Victor had signaled an accomplice.

With the car on idle, Victor walked back to the vault room, pressed the buttons to open the bay door, and—the words are Jim McKeon's—"No sooner did the car pull out than I heard the door close again." Victor had not moved. For the twenty-eight seconds it took the door to go up and down, Jim said he could "feel Victor's feet." Victor was wearing shoes, not sneakers, so if he had dashed for the car, pulled it out, and run in again, Jim would have heard Victor's footsteps. Since McKeon heard nothing except the car's quick exit, he concluded, and believes to this day, that an accomplice drove the Buick into Wells Fargo's parking lot.

With the car outside, Victor switched on a microphone plugged into the parking area. All three men heard a car on idle, but only Victor walked out the side door and, maybe with an accomplice and maybe not, sped off into the night.

It was 11 P.M., and with the mike still turned on, neither McKeon nor Girard heard anything except the loud beating of their own hearts.

Jim laid low for five minutes, convinced himself Victor was gone for good, and tried to free his legs. To his delight, the ropes came off so easily he was on his feet in seconds, but with his hands still cuffed behind his back, Jim looked to Tim Girard for help. Tim, still choking, had spent the last five minutes trying to catch a pain-free breath. Finally, he kicked off a sneaker and pulled one leg free, which allowed him to breathe with ease. Jim, by this time at Tim's side, took the ropes off his other leg, and once the jacket was off Tim's head, the two feverishly tried to free their hands.

Angry but still thinking clearly, Jim noticed his car keys on the desk. There was a cuff key on the ring, and if Tim could somehow use it to open the lock, they would be able to push an alarm. Jim had already tried to hit a portable device with his feet, but it lay on a shelf that was out of reach. Only hands would do the trick.

Seated back to back, the two men fiddled with key and cuffs. Tim missed the first few times, and Jim, getting angrier by the minute ("How could he do this to me?") yelled at Tim to finish the job. At last the cuffs were off, Jim pushed two of the alarms, and, still on high, he reached for a shotgun and the phone. He dialed the alarm company, got no answer, and immediately called the West Hartford police. The dispatcher who answered at precisely 11:08 told him the police were already outside. All he had to do was open the gates.

Jim said, "No way." He was worried that if an officer took him for the thief, he'd get from the cops the bullet wound he didn't get from Victor. Jim thought he would tell the police to step into the caged side entrance, and once they realized he was on their side, he would press the switch that granted access to the vault room.

Outside, Jack Casey and George Mucha already had Wells Fargo surrounded. They'd arrived at the scene two minutes after receiving the radio call, but remembering their dispatcher's warning ("This is the real thing") they parked their cars down the road and silently walked to the Wells Fargo depot. Mucha edged his way around the front while Casey, in the rear, negotiated with Jim for safe passage into the vault room.

Later Casey would curse fate. Not only was Wells Fargo on his beat, he'd been a "quarter mile down the street" for the last two hours. Chasing a burglar through the housing project across the road from Wells Fargo, Casey had lost the kid in the dark, and he and a Hartford cop were planning to search further when the call came in. Casey understood there was no way he could have known what Victor was doing, but he still regretted that he had been so close to a robbery he could do nothing about.

When Casey finally got inside, his first job was to quiet a "highly agitated" Jim McKeon. With tape still stuck to his hair and rope marks around his neck, Jim only wanted to bitch about Victor: "I can't believe he did it." Casey, a sensitive, intelligent officer, understood Jim's mood, yet he also had a job to do. What had happened? How much money did he get? And how can you help us catch him?

As Casey tried to calm Jim down, other officers started to arrive. Mucha came in and Jack Bannan wanted to, but he couldn't get out of the cage at the side entrance. Too busy trying to calm McKeon and quiz Girard, his fellow officers' preoccupation with the robbery made Jack Bannan a momentary prisoner. He couldn't believe it.

Nor could he, Casey, or Mucha believe what "these kids"—the guards—were telling them. Used to robberies of $100 here or even $1,000 there, Jim's initial guess of $5 million seemed ridiculous. In his mind, Casey said, "This guy is full of it," but once Jim proved his point, Jack Casey wanted to leave the room. He was so flabbergasted by the amount of money lost that he felt like laughing. This was comedy of the absurd, and he'd never seen anything like it.

Still, no matter how great the loss, this case would be "no sweat" to complete. Since everybody knew "who done it" right from the start, it would be a piece of cake to catch a Puerto Rican kid carrying more than a thousand pounds of money, traveling in a 1973 Buick with no spare tire. Victor Gerena would be behind West Hartford's bars before the night was out.

But he would never be convicted unless police properly "secured" the crime scene. Carefully moving from the vault room to the loading dock and back again, Casey, Mucha, and Bannan made sure none of the physical evidence was touched or tampered with, and once the guards mentioned the injections, the police worried about the health of their only witnesses. Girard was hustled off to a hospital at once but Jim McKeon, as conscientious as ever, refused to leave. Not only did he need to get a total on "his money" he also wanted to do whatever he could to help police put a literal roadblock in the path of his former friend. Victor Gerena had robbed Jim McKeon, and Jim was "steaming."

He was also quite helpful. Within ten minutes of the robbery, officers had Victor's personnel file in their possession, and with this evidence in hand, the bosses took over what the uniforms had begun. Lt. John Suchocki was on the premises minutes after members of his squad arrived, and, following on his heels, Lt. (of detectives) Tony Duffy rolled into the industrial park at roughly 11:20 P.M.. The bosses, with more on the way, were about to take command, and the uniformed rank and file resented the way they were pushed to the sides.

It could not be otherwise. A police department is a hierarchy based on a military model. Uniforms like Casey and Bannan, however dedicated and intelligent, are still grunts. Their job is not to reason why, their job is to obey any legitimate orders

received from sergeants, lieutenants, captains, assistant chiefs, and *the* chief. In West Hartford, the everyday atmosphere is especially relaxed, yet few officers fail to show deference when a supervisor appears or interrupts. The bosses are in charge, particularly when something big happens.

Immediately told about the supposed $5 million loss, Lt. Suchocki ordered Casey to "cut the shit." An armed robbery was no time for jokes: "What did the guy get?" Casey repeated his message, and Suchocki, as astonished as everybody else, took a second to get his bearings. In fact, when Tony Duffy came in, the two lieutenants "just looked at each other." Neither man knew —because Wells Fargo had never said—that that kind of money was stored in their jurisdiction. Neither man had a proper expression for by far the largest robbery in their combined forty-four years of police experience.

To Duffy and Suchocki's credit, surprise did not produce confusion. Both the uniformed officers and Jim McKeon agree that, within minutes, a businesslike attitude prevailed. With each lieutenant manning a phone, the FBI, the buses, the trains, the state police, and the airports were notified by 11:30 P.M. Brainard Airport, a private facility, was also called, but the tower had closed down at 10 P.M. and no officers were sent to check it out, because the most immediate priority was to find a green 1973 Buick and a twenty-five-year-old Puerto Rican kid named Victor Gerena.

Since neither guard had noticed the car's license plate, police keyed on the thief. Where did Victor live? And on the off chance that he might stupidly stop at home, what officers should go to the house? Suchocki based his decision on one fact: "Who's wearing a vest?" In West Hartford, bulletproof protection is optional and expensive. Officers pay as much as $400 for a vest, and, in general, only the younger cops see the need for such costly protection. As Jack Bannan put it, "The older guys don't wear 'em," because they think nothing will stop a bullet when their number's up.

Bannan didn't agree. With so many nuts on the street, he thought the house's odds improved when cops wore two shields —their badge and their bulletproof vest. It was like seat belts; many people didn't wear them either, but careful drivers, reading the statistics, chose science instead of fate.

With the bulletproof officers selected, Suchocki took formal command of the street operation. He began by calling the Hartford police. Since Victor lived in their jurisdiction, they would be an integral part of an operation that could turn violent. Meanwhile, Tony Duffy, famous for his silver tongue, got set to call Liza Soto. Officers now knew that she and Victor lived together, and to reduce the chance of a conflict, they wanted to let her know who they were and why they were coming. She was bound to be disconcerted by a midnight call from the police; Duffy's job was to lay the groundwork for a nonviolent meeting.

Police used no sirens on the way to Victor's apartment. In fact, when Suchocki and his three men joined up with the two Hartford officers, they met in a gas station on the corner of Victor's block. None of the officers expected Victor to be home, but a half hour after the robbery, none of the officers yet knew how smart he was. An overexcited street kid might have been silly enough to return home before leaving for parts unknown. They didn't know for certain but meant to take no chances—not with a kid, sure to be nervous, holding a shotgun in his arms.

After a short meeting at the gas station, the police slowly walked down the street, trying to conceal their movements. In general they were successful, except when Bannan and a Hartford officer positioned themselves behind a van across the street from Victor's apartment. With guns out, they were waiting for something to happen when a man came out of his house, exclaimed "Holy shit," and scurried inside. In retrospect, it seems funny; at the time, it underlined the seriousness of the situation.

While Bannan was moving toward the van, Detective Dana Hallenbeck, on Victor's side of the street, wanted to hug walls. Recalling the many hours of training he'd received, Hallenbeck calmed himself ("I'm sure I was shaking") by deliberately repeating the lessons taught by his police instructors. That night he was glad he'd gone to school; now all he had to do was to put police theory into police practice.

Behind the house, Jack Casey waited with a shotgun. He was the only West Hartford officer who had one because only he had qualified to use it. Understandably, the other officers might have wanted a defense equal to the thief's offense, but due primarily to the fear of lawsuits, bosses hesitated to put shotguns in the hands of officers who, despite years of responsible work, had never qualified on a practice range.

With all his men in position, Suchocki radioed Duffy, who immediately called Liza Soto. Trying to use his most soothing

voice, Duffy told her the police were outside because they believed her boyfriend had been involved in a robbery at Wells Fargo. When Liza, flustered and surprised, nevertheless agreed to let the police in, Duffy told her to walk downstairs and open the door. Policemen would be outside to receive her.

Here one officer made a fundamental error. Instead of allowing Liza to follow instructions ("Come forward, with your hands visible. Walk to the sidewalk, turn to your right, and walk to the sound of our voices"), an officer walked directly under a streetlight, "broke our cover," and risked being "blown away." Luckily nothing happened, and Suchocki, now talking to Liza, told everyone to somewhat lower their guard. "It's OK, she's going to let us in."

While Suchocki stayed in the street, and Bannan went to guard the rear of the house, three officers accompanied Liza Soto as she climbed the stairs to her and Victor's home. Approaching the door, officers were put on guard by the loud barking of a dog, so Liza suggested she go first. The dog was a Doberman pinscher; it would be safer for all concerned if he was put in the bathroom.

Once inside the apartment, Hallenbeck watched as a nervous Liza Soto called Victor's mother and brother. They didn't know where he was either, but in one of the bedrooms Jack Casey thought he had struck gold. On a shelf in one of the closets lay "two, big canvas duffel bags." Recalling Jim McKeon's comments about Victor using heavy bags with large zippers, Casey, "with my heart pounding," was sure he'd found the money, except that the large bags held countless pairs of shoes. Liza apparently liked variety in her footwear.

Casey might have been upset if it hadn't been for the growl of Liza's dog. He'd gotten out of the bathroom, and watching Jack as he opened Liza's bags, the dog seemed to be set to attack. Casey had readied his gun when Liza came to the rescue. She saved the dog, the officers continued their fruitless search, and Dana Hallenbeck summed things up when he called Tony Duffy. "We struck out." What did he want them to do now?

Duffy said there would be another assignment momentarily, but if Liza Soto would agree to come to the station, somebody should bring her in now. Duffy's instincts told him she knew nothing about Victor's plans, yet in a case pattern that was already beginning to emerge, nobody could say for certain. Police had a barrel full of possibilities, and one by one, they had to check

out each of them. There was no other choice when the thief had presented police with a situation aptly summarized by an FBI agent: "Except for the car, we didn't have anything."

Jack Bannan brought Liza in, and he was happy to do so. After all, while the other officers had searched the apartment, he and his .38 revolver had guarded the building's rear, hoping all the while "that this asshole doesn't come out with a shotgun, because if he does, I'm going to be in a hell of a lot of trouble." Now Bannan could relax and even laugh when told about his wife's response to a call from the West Hartford police dispatcher. Informed that Jack would be home late, there had been a $5 million robbery in town, Mrs. Bannan had said "Oh, yeah?" and abruptly hung up the phone. She thought Jack had gone out for a beer with friends.

The ride from Victor's house to the West Hartford police station took only ten minutes, but after so much stress, Liza Soto was now "visibly upset." Although she had politely agreed to give a statement, the awful reality of her situation had apparently begun to sink in. That morning she had happily applied for a marriage license; after two years of living together, she and Victor would finally be married. Now her fiancé was a thief, and she was a jilted bride. Only once did she let her anger out—"How could he do this to me? We're getting married Friday." The rest of the time she sat in the front seat with Bannan and seemed genuinely interested in helping the police. She understood perfectly that Victor could be killed in a shoot-out, but besides being frightened, there was nothing else she could do. "I don't know much," she told police.

That remained to be seen. Because even if Liza had played no part in the robbery, police naturally suspected she knew something. Perhaps Victor had made an inadvertent comment concerning his travel plans? Perhaps Liza had answered phone calls from friends who were accomplices in that night's theft? Perhaps she knew the source of Victor's green Buick? At the very least Liza had to know the man as well as anybody in Hartford. What kind of guy was Victor Manuel Gerena, Jr.?

Detective Steve Looby wanted an answer, but before he posed even one question, Steve asked Liza to bear with him. Like her, he'd just gotten out of bed. But unlike her, he'd spent the last few weeks working flat out on an arson case that was tearing up West Hartford's Jewish community. Steve had hit the sack

hoping for a good night's sleep when out of the blue, he got a call to "get down to the station." At first Steve thought it was a joke. He too had laughed when he heard the $5 million figure, but he got serious as he realized that, this time, the unreal was real.

Before the interview formally began, Steve did something any red-blooded American would do: He made coffee. Liza waited alone in his office, complaining to herself that it was cold. At roughly 1 A.M., the two began an interview that lasted nearly two hours.

Steve Looby has a light touch. He quickly established such a friendly atmosphere that Liza, at first quite upset, ended up cracking jokes. She seemed to like Looby, but when it came to information, Liza had nothing much to offer. In fact, this lively, twenty-year-old woman had so much poise that her voice did not waver when she told Looby she had "no idea" where Victor got the Buick, the vehicle he had used to drive her to city hall that morning. Yet when Looby, on five separate occasions, asked her what she recalled about a Buick, Liza came back with, "Nothing, honestly, nothing." She couldn't think of any friends who would loan him a car, she and Victor "didn't know anybody who had a car like that," and, just to set the record straight, Victor had taken the bus to work. She'd sent him out the door with his lunch bag and seventy-five cents travel money.

At the time, Looby had no reason to doubt her word. He moved on to other topics, but a better memory about the car might have helped police catch Victor, and it certainly would have saved two officers a great deal of time and effort. At roughly the same time as Looby was questioning Liza, Dana Hallenbeck and an FBI agent were entering the security offices of Central Connecticut State University. Since one of the guards recalled seeing a Central sticker on the Buick's rear windshield, after a check of the lots, Hallenbeck and his colleague leafed through more than seven thousand registration cards. By 6:00 A.M., they had a few leads, but none of this time would have been wasted if Liza Soto had recalled the car she and Victor had used to attend the Italian festival on Saturday night.

With nothing on the car, Looby turned to the man Gerena. Would any of Victor's close friends help him with a robbery? "No," because Victor had "no friends." Pressed on this—it was a surprising statement—Liza repeated her comment and tried to prove her point by giving a brief sketch of her and Victor's life.

He went to work, "always" called an hour before he came home, and returned to their apartment. That was it. On weekends, they stayed around the house, occasionally walked to a nearby movie, and less frequently saw their relatives. It was a picture—subsequently confirmed—of a life as dull as Walter Mitty's. Except that Victor had forcefully acted on the dreams he apparently confided to no one.

Liza seemed genuinely sure she would have known if Victor had planned the robbery months or even days in advance. "We were fine," able to "honestly talk things out." Yet Victor had in no way indicated his larcenous intentions. He'd slept well the night before, watched a little TV in the morning, and gone to work without the slightest hint he was leaving her forever. "I mean I would have noticed it, him getting jittery or something. One thing we always had was honesty. He would tell me anything, even to this extreme." But his behavior had betrayed nothing. "I mean if he was gonna do it, he would have said good-bye in a different way. He just said good-bye; see you later."

At this point, Looby felt sorry for Liza. He thought she had been betrayed by her lover, and to his credit, he never played on the pain that seemingly lurked below the surface. He needed information, but instead of feeding a possible desire for revenge, Looby asked Liza to act on her love. Victor had a shotgun and two .38 revolvers. By now every cop in New England was looking for him, and if an officer came upon Victor unexpectedly, "there was a good chance somebody would get hurt." Did Liza know anything that might help the police find her fiancé?

Once again Liza said, "No." Looby felt she wanted to help ("She was squirming in terms of what choice to make") but whenever push came to shove, Liza proved far more loyal to Victor than Victor seemingly had been to her.

Looby's next set of questions related to the family. If Victor had no friends, maybe a relative had helped him rob Wells Fargo. What about Victor's father? Liza didn't know, but she doubted it. His dad lived in the South Bronx, and "Victor didn't get along well with his father." What about brothers? Victor had three, but two were away at college, and they didn't see much of the other brother, Bobby, because Victor "didn't get along with his wife." OK, what about the mother? Did Victor get along with her? "Very well," but she certainly had nothing to do with the robbery. Gloria Gerena was a highly respected member of the

Puerto Rican community. It was unthinkable that she would be involved in any illegal activity.

With no leads about family or friends, Looby turned to a very painful subject: Victor and Liza's marriage. Had he been so negatively affected by the breakup of his two previous relationships that Victor just got "cold feet"? Had he taken the money to escape failure at home? Liza laughed. She and Victor had been secretly planning the marriage for months. A justice of the peace was already booked for the ceremony; they had made no travel plans—they just wanted to be with each other; and Victor, instead of having cold feet, was eager for the marriage to occur. "He couldn't wait till Friday came."

Given these responses, Looby concluded that Liza Soto was either a consummate actress, or much more likely, as ignorant of Victor's plans as the guards at Wells Fargo. In any event, the interview ended with Liza signing a sworn statement. She continued to plead ignorance about the Buick ("We do not have a car and I have no idea where Victor would get one"). Looby took her at her word, and at 3 A.M. Liza Soto left the police station with Victor's brother Bobby.

Police had first tried to locate Robert Gerena at his home in New Britain. About 1:30 A.M., they'd surrounded his house, and fearing Victor's shotgun, their weapons were drawn. This produced such curiosity in a passing motorist that in sharp contrast to the fellow who yelled "Holy shit" in Hartford, the New Britain motorist kept driving around the block. Bannan said, "His eyes got bigger, his mouth wider" on each of his four passes, but ultimately he went away. And so did the police. Politely greeted by Bobby's wife, they discovered he was not at home. Since that left officers with no other relatives to try—they had already staked out Victor's mother's house—they returned to the station for additional assignments.

Meanwhile, Bobby Gerena had been picked up by a couple of Hartford police. Stopped while driving his car through town, Gerena willingly let the officers search his vehicle, and since they found nothing, Gerena's cooperative attitude produced a similar response from the police. Bobby was allowed to drive his car to West Hartford. Once there, he quickly convinced officers he knew nothing about the robbery. On his way out the door he took his sister-in-law-to-be with him.

At the police station, Duffy had called in every available detective, and the FBI already had a number of its agents on the

spot. McKeon, Girard, and Shewokis, the man who had accompanied McKeon to West Springfield, were anxiously waiting for polygraphers to verify the sworn statements they had already given. And in every nook and cranny, police found a reporter. At first it was just the radio and the newspapers, but local TV crews soon overwhelmed everybody. With an emptied armored truck, cops everywhere, and the possibility of a real-life chase scene, Victor's robbery was such a terrific photo opportunity that no station let it pass. Each wanted the inside track, and none meant to take second place in the race to put Victor's caper on the tube. Duffy, busy trying to catch a thief, complained that he had to put one officer on full-time media duty. What the *Boston Herald* later called "The Big Sleep Heist" was national news.

It was also a local mystery, one that police theory said would be no problem to solve. In the typical robbery case, police chase a shadow. Armed often with nothing more than a thumbnail sketch of the thief, officers spend their time trying to find out who did it. But once police know the thief's identity, the criminal is generally arrested, put behind bars, and convicted. Contrary to popular misconceptions, fully 69 percent of adults arrested for serious crimes, and 95 percent of those prosecuted, are found guilty by the American judicial system.

In Victor's case, police scaled the major hurdles to any robbery conviction as soon as officers entered the Wells Fargo depot. Everybody immediately knew who did it, and except for a few particulars, how he did it. The real mystery was the getaway. Where did he go? Did he drop off the Buick at once? If so, what other vehicle did he use? Was Jim McKeon right? Did Victor have accomplices? How many? Who were they? And most puzzling of all, how did Victor plan to dispose of more than a half-ton of cash? What does a person do with two or three hundred thousand $10 bills?

Police began to ask these questions hours after the robbery occurred. In fact, seated around a long table in a room reserved for special conferences, West Hartford's Police Chief Francis Reynolds, Lieutenants Duffy and Suchocki, and FBI agents Jim Millan and Dan Mahan ordered officers to check every parking lot in Hartford, while others were told to locate the source of the car, while others tried to alert every law enforcement officer in New England, while still others interviewed Victor's ex-wife and ex-lover.

The police did get results from their exhaustive search. By

early morning they knew that Victor had rented the car from Ugly Duckling, and by early afternoon—1:30, to be exact—they had found the Buick parked in the lot of a local motel. The trouble was, with the car in custody, the best lead to Victor's whereabouts no longer existed. Careful to the end, Victor had left nothing of interest in the Buick, which left police with major questions: How did Victor get away? And where did he go?

Despite the lack of clues, police optimistically continued their investigation. After all, even without the car, police still knew who had done it. Victor's picture was already on its way to officers all over the United States; the media would plaster his portrait in every medium of significance; and with Wells Fargo's initial reward of $350,000 ($100,000 for Victor, $250,000 for the money), some clue to his whereabouts would quickly materialize.

Maybe, but this kid was sharp. And an early incident at police headquarters suggests how well Gerena covered his tracks. It was 3 P.M. the day after the robbery. Officers were crowded into Tony Duffy's otherwise comfortable office, and Dana Hallenbeck, unable to find a seat, sat down on the floor, put his back against the wall, and immediately fell asleep. When the call had come in the night before, Hallenbeck had already been on duty sixteen hours straight. He'd gone to Wells Fargo, to Victor's house, and to New Britain to check out the car registrations, and had then interviewed Victor's ex-lover, Maggie. Hallenbeck was understandably exhausted. He needed sleep, but the police needed clues. If they didn't stay on the case, officers might discover that they had tired of chasing Victor long before he had tired of running from them.

So far in this case there was only one certainty. A young Puerto Rican kid named Victor Gerena had successfully robbed Wells Fargo and Company of $7,017,152.

2

The Chase

VICTOR GERENA had committed the perfect American crime. He did so many supposedly wrong things right that, two days after his getaway, Victor was a full-fledged hero in the eyes of a diverse group of Hartford citizens. Downtown, Puerto Rican residents actually kissed his photograph when a shopkeeper put it on display in front of his store, while uptown, in the suburban police station assigned to catch Victor, cops praised their prey. The bad guy became a good guy because, quite unintentionally, Victor Gerena had acted as a magnet for a wide variety of American dreams, resentments, and contradictory attitudes.

"We cops thought Victor hit the lotto." That's how one uniformed officer summed up the robbery, and his approving attitude typified a view that cut across all social classes. In the United States, making it is still synonymous with big bucks; lots of people want to be rich. But Victor had acted on his desires. He had seen an opening, and many people thought he deserved praise, because even though he had broken the law, Victor had had the courage to score when 7 million opportunities came knocking. "I mean, I might have done the same thing myself," said the cop who applauded Victor's efforts.

And $7 million! The sheer magnitude of Victor's haul impressed anyone trying to assess his worth. If he had taken $100,000 or even $1 million, his would have been a minor-league holdup. But as of September 15, 1983, Victor Gerena had successfully pulled off the second largest robbery in American history, and if you counted only single-handed thefts, Victor was Number One. He got admiration because so much loot actually seemed to put one of the Ten Commandments on hold. People almost never actually advocated stealing, but for $7 million, plus a spot in the *Guinness Book of World Records,* well, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea?

And who did Victor hurt? People kept coming back to that question, and even though most observers readily agreed that

Victor would have "blasted" Jim McKeon at the first sign of real resistance, few people blamed Victor for what might have happened. As long as neither guard had been hurt, it was a "good robbery," especially because, as Linda Stavola of Simsbury, Connecticut, told the *Hartford Courant,* "It was bank money, not people money."

People money is what you have in your pockets or under your mattress, or it's money you hide in tennis ball cans. Since a person sweats for "people money," it's wrong to steal that kind of currency.

But Victor took money that "deserved" to be stolen. Wells Fargo paid poor wages, and after a year and a half of good work, they had rewarded Victor by refusing to give him benefits. Like so many other corporate giants, Wells Fargo was asking for it, and all Victor did was offer a helping hand. "I hope he gets away with it 100 percent," said Nick Cane, a local gas station operator. "I hope they never catch him."

For Mr. Cane and so many other Gerena boosters, Victor's apparent success brought deep resentments to the surface. Banks supposedly accept the deposits of average citizens, and through clever manipulation and outright chicanery, make large profits that flow into the pockets of fat-cat financiers. Instead of sharing the wealth, bankers tell customers they can't get the mortgages they need or loans to keep their businesses afloat. Victor's robbery became the average guy's revenge for every time a banker forgot how hard it was to wait for the next paycheck or, even worse, the next job.

The insurance companies came last. The public soon found out that Wells Fargo had coverage (with a $250,000 deductible), and in Hartford, Connecticut, the "insurance capital of the world," people angrily lashed out at the hand that fed them. Indeed the resentment against Travelers or Aetna or Prudential* seemed even stronger than the animosity directed at banks. To my surprise, one West Hartford detective saved his loudest criticism for the "goddam insurance companies." Somehow, in his eyes, Victor hadn't taken anybody's money. Since all those "bastards" did was total up profits on a computer, the $7 million loss became a bookkeeping change typed in by an underpaid, overworked clerk, who like the detective, probably had a smile on his face when he thought about the nearly $7 million that was deducted from the company's profit column.

*Since the name of the company was not revealed, people criticized whatever firm came to mind.

Enjoy! That was the advice Victor got when a local entrepreneur quickly immortalized the robbery on inexpensive T-shirts that started appearing about a week after the getaway. Over a picture of Victor's face, the shirts had this message: GO FOR IT.

When Jim Millan saw the shirts, he certainly wanted to go for it but the only "it" on his wish list was the immediate capture of Victor Manuel Gerena. How people could applaud robbery not only baffled Jim, it disturbed him. He'd been a dedicated FBI agent for fifteen years, and his father, now retired, had been a dedicated agent before him. A passionate commitment to law and order ran so deep in Millan's family that some reporters took his straight-laced demeanor for prudishness—which was a mistake. Jim Millan had a sense of humor and a ready smile, but he always kept them in check when he worked. Catching bank robbers, Jim's speciality at the FBI, was serious business, so Millan sometimes out-Hoovered Hoover. Or, as one person he interviewed said, "The man is a steel rod."

That's too harsh, but it does catch Jim's bureau presentation of himself. Agent James Millan always looks 1950s perfect. His dark, probably expensive suits normally cover a white shirt and a quiet tie. He wears his black hair short and neatly combed, his shoes are perenially shined, and his car, an Oldsmobile, is clean and neat. It's not an act. Millan believes that agents of authority —especially FBI agents—represent the powers that be. To look or sound anything other than manicured is to slight the country that Millan deeply loves. In a profession in which many officers overload their sentences with obscenities, Millan never curses. And in an occupation in which officers love to blab to the press, Millan always maintains silence because to do otherwise would jeopardize a specific case or, even worse, the bureau's reputation for professionalism, probity, and efficiency.

Millan is the agent Hoover always said he wanted, and that was potentially bad news for Victor Gerena because, hours after the robbery occurred, Millan became its case agent, which meant that unless he died, retired, or got transferred, Millan had the case until he solved it. And since Jim was only forty, with no intention of retiring, Victor could theoretically expect at least a twenty-year chase from a first-class bloodhound.

But that was theory. In reality, Millan expected to quickly collar "the $7 million man." Everybody knew who did it. The only problem, which was not a big problem, was to locate Victor Gerena and any helpers he might have had.

The first break in the case came when agents located the getaway car. Officers who checked every parking lot in greater Hartford finally spotted the Buick in front of the Suisse Chalet Motel, at roughly 1:30 P.M. the day after the theft; Millan rushed to the scene. He expected, in his methodical way, to inspect the car and its contents, when, directly above his head, he spotted "Sky–3." This was the helicopter of a local TV station, and Millan, knowing he had not said a word about the car, wondered why he was on TV. An answer quickly arrived in the person of States Attorney John Bailey. Apparently he or someone in his office had called the media. As Jim Millan cooled his heels and Victor Gerena continued his travels, Bailey took credit on television for the quick apprehension of the getaway car.

When Bailey's photo opportunity ended, Millan and his colleagues got a chance to inspect the Buick, which contained no significant evidence. Victor had obligingly left behind the revolver he had borrowed from Wells Fargo and the shotgun, but except for his prints and those of the woman who had rented the car before him, the vehicle was print free. And money free. And clue free. Since Millan had nothing to work with, he and his coworkers brainstormed about possibilities.

Since the car was parked across the street from a small, private airport, Brainard Field, Victor might have flown away with the loot minutes after he left Wells Fargo. Agents doubted this because the field had a barbed wire–topped fence in the area near where the Buick was found. But Victor could have driven to the open side of the field, deposited himself and the money on a plane, and then, to confuse the cops, a pal might have driven the car to the motel. Agents doubted this scenario, yet they obviously had no choice but to inspect the field and every aircraft that had recently landed or taken off.

Millan and company then turned to the deserted area behind the motel, which offered some hope of clues. Two hundred yards beyond the Chalet and a discount leather goods warehouse, the paved road turned to dirt. Right in the middle of Hartford was a two-mile stretch of wilderness. Legally controlled by the Water Authority, this no-man's-land contained a number of inviting

transfer points. Minutes after he left Wells Fargo, Victor might have met a buddy, or, what seemed more likely at the time, he might have had another vehicle stored in the grassy area behind the motel. Indeed, when a quick check indicated that the narrow back roads led to a main street on the other side of Hartford, agents jumped at the possibilities. They searched and searched again ("You have no idea how many time I scoured this area," said one FBI agent), but all to no avail.

It took three or four days to draw a blank on this search. Many agents spent long hours combing the brush for the slightest shred of evidence, only to come back empty-handed, and bored. Newspaper and television reporters tried to win an audience with gangster hype, but for many cops in the field the search for Victor spelled tedium. For example, one team of officers obediently took a tour of apartment house basements—perhaps Victor had secreted the money in one—while another did a door-to-door search of every storage facility in the greater Hartford area. From U-Haul to Rent-A-Space, FBI agents asked about recent deliveries of large packages. Did a clerk yesterday check in two or three cartons labeled "refrigerator" or "washing machine"? What about some duffel bags lumped in with a bunch of other camping equipment? Or three or four cardboard boxes left by a nervous customer in a great hurry? Any recent delivery would do because at this stage of the investigation, the crucial period if Victor was to successfully escape capture, the police had nothing. In the absence of solid leads and the presence of press and political pressure, agents were forced to follow up tips that ranged from the farcical to the frustrating.

On the farcical side were the supposed spottings of Victor Gerena. Three nights after the robbery, headquarters received word that he was simultaneously in Springfield, Massachusetts; Westport, Connecticut; Atlantic City, New Jersey; and somewhere in Pennsylvania. That same night he was also spotted in a Waterbury apartment, while "a guy in Avon reported that a small plane flew over his house at a low altitude about 10:30 P.M." Presumably the quite serious caller believed that Victor was in the craft, but this was one lead the police never followed up.

More serious and time-consuming was a tip from Victor's "other girlfriend." She had called in five days after the robbery, promising to provide far more evidence than Liza Soto had. With that kind of bait, police arranged to meet Miriam Ruiz on Sep-

tember 19. When they went to her home, she wasn't there, but a later meeting at the Hartford Education Center produced not only Miriam Ruiz, but Luis Angel Sanchez,* a transsexual claiming that she/he had had a long-term relationship with Victor. This information got the police's attention, but "when we began to ask about their relationship, she/he refused to answer any more questions and insisted upon leaving the office." Police checked their computers and discovered that Sanchez had a long arrest record for drugs, interfering with the police, and impersonating a female.

Nobody knew what to think when the police received yet another tip. A woman named Jenny Maldonado called to say "that Victor Gerena had given Miriam Ruiz money to complete her sex-change operation after the robbery." This seemed crazy, but five days after his getaway, officers still knew very little about Victor's life and character. Since family and friends remained tight-lipped, officers had no way to readily invalidate Miriam's or Jenny's claims. And when police tried to see Miriam again she not only refused to be interviewed but told her parole officer she was fleeing the state to "get lost" in New York.

Officers were about to issue a warrant for Miriam's arrest when she suddenly agreed to set things straight. This time she denied having a relationship with Victor, denied supplying him with drugs, and denied knowing Jenny Maldonado. The police were more confused than ever until West Hartford detective Ken O'Brien had a bright idea. Knowing that all calls to police headquarters were recorded, he compared the tapes of Miriam's and Jenny's calls, and, lo and behold, Miriam was not only Luis, she was also Jenny. All three personae had been lying to the police or as O'Brien put it after ten days of pointless work, "indications are that Miriam (actually Luis) never met Victor Gerena and all information that she (and Jenny) supplied is false."

Few cops expected much from the bizarre, but they did hope for something significant from the drug tests given to guards McKeon and Girard. Since both men had been taken to hospitals right after the robbery, police impatiently pressured doctors to explain their findings. What did Victor inject into his coworkers' arms?

In McKeon's case, nobody would ever know. The staff at Hartford Hospital remembered Jim's always pleasant disposition—when a nurse asked him about the rope cuts on his wrists, McKeon quipped, "I'm into bondage"—but when it came to his blood and urine samples, the evidence had somehow disappeared. Perhaps, suggested one wag, Victor had them.

*These are pseudonyms.

Girard's records contained a color photograph of the puncture mark on the back of his left arm, but beyond that, his tests showed positive only for nicotine—Girard was a heavy smoker—and aspirin. However, Dr. Steven Wong cautioned the impatient agents, it was still entirely possible that something potent had been injected into Girard's arm. The hospital checked only for the 150 most common drugs; Victor might have used something uncommon. The three-hour gap between the time of the injection and the taking of the samples might have reduced drug levels below the scale of the tests. And, as proved by the photo, Victor had missed the vein. Since the drug apparently went right into the muscle of Girard's arm, there was a possibility that the substance was absorbed by the body before it reached the bloodstream in quantities large enough to register on the tests.

Millan and his colleagues moved on to what looked like their last chance for a quick break in the case. After the Buick rolled into headquarters, police checked the speedometer, which showed that Victor had traveled eighty-seven miles since he had rented the automobile. Since the distance from Wells Fargo to the motel was six miles, police wanted to know where Victor had gone in the eighty-one other miles of travel. In interviews with friends and neighbors, they had discovered that he'd taken Liza to get the marriage license and that he'd used the car to chauffeur his daughter and Liza to the Italian festival; but when they asked family and friends to fill in the blank mileage, police got no cooperation. That meant that officers had to knowingly reconstruct Victor's weekend on guesstimates, but without help from the family, and with a rush order to catch Victor, police felt they had only one choice: to construct theories on shaky premises.

The officers could account for twenty-seven miles of travel. That left a sixty-mile void that was filled in with the following theory: Suppose that instead of driving right to the motel, Victor had first stored the money in a safe location. He could have driven roughly thirty miles to drop off the cash and another thirty back to the motel for his getaway transportation. If he had stored the money fifteen miles away, the sixty miles could be accounted

for by a practice round-trip on Saturday or Sunday. These were only guesses, but with little information about what Victor had done that weekend, officers drew two circles—one with a fifteen- and the other with a thirty-mile radius—around Hartford and began a massive search of likely storage facilities. Even campgrounds were included—a call to a number found at Victor's apartment was answered by a local tent city—but as they expected, officers once again wasted their time.

A case with a sky-high solvability factor proved impossible to crack. As the computer-fed science of criminology met a variable called real life, Chief Frank "Franny" Reynolds asked for a meeting with Lon Lacey, the Special Agent-in-Charge of every FBI man in Connecticut. Reynolds, ever on guard for his department's reputation, wanted to assert himself before the case went any further. Thus, instead of taking place at FBI headquarters in New Haven, the meeting occurred in West Hartford, on Reynold's turf, inside the station one wiseacre called "Franny's toyshop."

Spic and span: That's the first impression offered by West Hartford's police station. The lawns are green and the sidewalks trash free. The building, once a high school, has been so thoroughly renovated that it lacks any architectural distinction. Today it's such a clean, neat, concrete rectangle, full of so many sparkling Andersen windows that it could easily blend in with a row of shops in a suburban mall.

Inside, the antiseptic atmosphere persists, except for the distinctly human touches added by Frank Reynolds. On the left, just past the entrance, is a display case full of dolls and badges. Reynolds collects police dolls of every shape and description: The showcase contains English bobbies standing beside Indian officers in crisp, white uniforms and a wide variety of American men in blue. Next to the dolls is a fancy showcase full of badges from virtually every police department in Connecticut. Across the aisle is a plaque containing the name and tenure of every West Hartford police chief. Reynolds' name is last, but many of his colleagues say it should be first because he battled city hall for the new quarters ("The old ones were a hell hole") and, when he finally wore down the politicians, he used the building to showcase the dolls that playfully symbolize the fierce pride Reynolds has in his vocation and his department.

Reynolds believes his cops are special. To his thinking they can easily stand comparison with any force in the state, but in the Wells Fargo case, Reynolds immediately sensed that his men and women could be made "to look like dummies." Their jurisdiction stopped at the city line, while Victor could already be in South America. Some Fed would collar the kid, and the FBI would take all the credit.

Reynolds meant for his people to stay at the center of the case, and, ever the politician, he acted to swiftly check the traditional adversary relationship between local cops and the FBI. Some of the tension stems from envy: The Feds make more money, they drive better cars (for example, Jim Millan's well-equipped Oldsmobile), and they have access to facilities and information no local force can hope to match. But besides the inevitable envy, there's the real and imagined condescension displayed by G-men; scuttlebutt has it that they walk around with their noses in the sky, treating locals like pompous professors lording it over first-year students. Finally there is the fear of getting shafted. "Never trust a Fed," a veteran sergeant repeatedly told me. They lie, they cheat, and they don't share the glory. Feds are out for themselves, and they don't care who gets hurt in the process.

After a quarter of a century of police work, Reynolds knew what could happen. He didn't believe it would ("not from Lon Lacey"), but he had to make sure. When the meeting took place, under a prominently displayed plaque that celebrates Reynold's attendance at the FBI National Academy,* the Chief asked that his station become headquarters for the national investigation. Naturally the FBI had the right and the need to garner information in any possible way. Reynolds knew his people could never compete with the facilities available to the FBI and he did not intend to inhibit the search for Victor. But as long as the investigation was based at the "toyshop," he could closely monitor the case, and when and if Victor was nabbed, West Hartford cops would stand beside—not behind—the Feds as national television broadcast the arrests.

Lon Lacey had "no problem" with the Chief's request. He liked Reynolds, and Lacey's intelligence, coupled with a law de-

*Instituted under Hoover, the academy exists to sharpen local skills and to reduce friction between "the Feds" and local officers. Only members of the highest echelon of local cops get a chance to attend. When he was graduated from the academy, Reynolds delivered the commencement address.

gree, gave him political skills every bit as sharp as the Chief's. Why antagonize a local when Lacey held all the good cards? Since only the bureau had the authority to really track Victor down, Lacey readily agreed to center the case in West Hartford and to share information obtained by the FBI, but only on a "need to know" basis. Reynolds and one or two other officers would be told what was going on, but any sensitive information conveyed to the key locals had to be kept from their own people. The Feds meant to keep such a tight lid on a case that was going who knew where that Lon Lacey reserved the right to stop sharing when and if anyone in West Hartford talked to the press.

Although Reynolds didn't like the idea of lying to his own people, he understood Lacey's position: "I would have done exactly the same thing myself." Roughly one week after the robbery, the authorities momentarily resolved their potential turf battles but quite accidentally, they did it in a manner that ultimately helped the press. Bureau agents, trained to make copies of everything, left carbons of every interview and document related to the case in the West Hartford station. Over time these provided a reservoir of otherwise unavailable information that ultimately made it much easier for reporters to uncover the real story of the robbery.

Despite concerns about the turf, agents and officers continued their quest for clues to Victor's whereabouts. Armed with a search and seizure warrant, they inspected Victor's apartment, but once again apparent leads quickly turned into a series of dead ends. For example, when they found long distance telephone bills in Victor's bedroom, investigators immediately opened their phone directories. They checked every number, only to discover that most of the calls were made by Victoria Barrera, the woman who sublet the apartment to Victor and Liza. A passport (issued to Victor in April 1983) openly lying on a bookcase suggested that Victor did not flee the country through normal channels. Road maps found in the bedroom belonged to Ms. Barrera. And as she told police, "Victor never asked me to obtain the maps for him."

With no apparent clues in the apartment, agents turned to its other occupant. They believed that Liza Soto did not know anything important about the robbery, but she had to have some clues or leads locked in her memory (as one cop put it, "For Christ's sake, she lived with the guy, didn't she?") so the police

tried to squeeze Liza by arresting her. The hopefully threatening charges were "first degree hindering prosecution," a felony, and "giving a false statement," a misdemeanor, but the police would happily drop their case "in a second" if Liza cooperated. "All we wanted to do," said one cop, "was see if Victor had somehow given Liza clues to his plans or destination."

Liza was potentially in trouble because of the sworn statement given to Detective Steve Looby the night of the robbery. She had said then that she had "no idea" where Victor would get a car, nor did she or Victor know "anybody who had a car like that." Liza had said five times that she knew nothing about the green Buick, but police files now contained the sworn statements of neighbors who had seen Liza in the car, and, as an ace up their sleeves, police had a secret tape recording of Liza's entire interview with Looby. If she claimed she had been misinterpreted, all officers had to do was play Liza to Liza.

That never happened because worried municipal officials got in the police's way. Right after Liza's arrest her lawyer loudly claimed she was jailed only because the police had nowhere else to turn. According to attorney Michael Graham, the FBI had "declared war on an innocent family," and the West Hartford cops had almost brutally harassed Liza the night they interrogated her ("There were two or three guys winging questions at her till four in the morning," Graham claimed). Instead of responding to the police's inquiries, Liza would answer their questions with the threat of a lawsuit. West Hartford pushed Liza Soto and went to court.

The police knew what Liza had said about the Buick. And the tape, although at times faint, clearly proved the West Hartford police had not harassed her. For roughly an hour and a half Liza quietly answered questions and the atmosphere was so relaxed that despite her quite understandable distress, Liza often joked with Looby. For example, asked if Victor had any other girlfriends, Liza paused for a split second and charmingly answered, "Not that I know of."

Liza had obviously been at ease, but despite the hard evidence that disproved her lawyer's claims, municipal attorneys ordered the police to "lay off." In the eyes of city officials, lawsuits got resolved not on the basis of facts but on the basis of money. If Liza's attorney sued, the city's insurance company might want to settle (as one official who refused to be named noted, "It was

easier to give the lawyer $20,000 than win in court with attorneys fees of $30,000"), and that would give outsiders the impression that the West Hartford police were guilty as charged. Better to let Liza alone and see if attorney Graham actually filed a lawsuit. Perhaps the countercharges would add up to nothing more than the "lawyer talk" that so often angers police and the general public.

Although the cops privately fumed when they read front-page stories about their war on Liza, they said nothing in public about their proof of innocence. The tape was sent to the FBI's vaults ("Just in case a suit materialized") while agents sought other leads. They were still certain Liza knew something that would help them, but she was left alone because city officials believed the truth had nothing to do with settling lawsuits.

Liza's silence forced police to detour their investigation. She was apparently Victor's most intimate friend, but even when officers came up with a suggestive lead, Liza's (and Victor's mother's) silence effectively checked any thorough investigation. For example, using her confiscated address book as a resource, police questioned anyone Liza listed. Most of the interviews proved worthless, but one of her former employers angrily told this story: "One day Soto wore a T-shirt top to work with an unknown Puerto Rican slogan on it. Soto said the slogan was about a Puerto Rican male who gave his life for the Puerto Rican independence cause." The employer said that Soto seemed adamant about the slogan and that, in his opinion, her attitude about the slogan was un-American.

If Liza had been cooperating, police might have found what they were frantically seeking: a motive for the robbery. As it was, officers never asked Liza about her and Victor's politics because, first, they were forbidden to speak with her, and, second, this isolated remark was one of the very few times that any of the more than two hundred people questioned mentioned Victor or Liza's deep commitment to the Puerto Rican people. It is true that roughly ten days after the robbery a West Hartford detective received word that "Los Macheteros did it," but the cop never followed up on this tip because few people who supposedly knew Victor had suggested that he possessed any strong political beliefs.

The cops were trying. Within ten days of the robbery, they

interviewed everybody from Victor's ex-wife to his father, from his high school chums to his dormmates at college. No potential source was excluded, yet the massed pile of information furnished no significant clues to Victor's motives or whereabouts. By all accounts, Victor Gerena was an extremely likable but very quiet guy. Maggie Ruiz, his ex-lover, said, "It was like living with a monk," and his ex-wife, Pamela Gerena, reaffirmed this impression when she told police, "You could never get into his head because Victor kept a lot of things to himself." This was so decidedly the case that, "If you defined a close friend as someone he could talk to," Pamela Gerena felt that Victor had no friends, only acquaintances.

That wasn't true. Victor had at least two close friends who definitely understood his beliefs and values. But since they weren't telling police about the Victor that had opened up to them, the authorities had to rely on information gathered from people who had known Victor in high school—seven years before the robbery—or, even worse from the police's point of view, people who had known Victor throughout his series of dead-end jobs. From the National Guard to Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, from the Parks Department to Wells Fargo, Victor had taken work he hated. He had had to survive, but the despised jobs brought out Victor's loner side so strongly that his many colleagues had little to tell the police. As the other guards at Wells Fargo stressed, you could sit in a truck with him all day and "the guy wouldn't say a word."

Somehow the police did miss the one source who might have willingly told them about the Gerena behind the loner's mask. Donald Caron, who acted as Victor's college dorm director, describes an eighteen-year-old who was "almost eloquent" in his criticism of the United States and, more specifically, American behavior toward its Puerto Rican colony. To Caron, Victor always described the police as "pigs," and to Caron, Victor described a capitalist system "that sucked the blood from the poor." This Victor might have started police thinking about politics, but in September 1983 Victor's former college no longer existed. Closed because of a lack of students, Annhurst College in Woodstock, Connecticut, offered few easy leads for the police. Former faculty members recalled an unhappy Victor, but no one mentioned Caron, who had left the school to study for the priesthood.

Without Caron (or Liza, or Victor's family, or his few real

friends), the police ultimately drew what they agreed was a superficial portrait of their prey. If they had had more information, officers would have called the "bureau shrinks" who, armed with detailed biographies, are paid to predict how and what a man on the run will do. In Victor's case, however, the shrinks stayed in Washington. Meanwhile, local police, relying on educated guesses, decided that Victor acted out of desperation. He'd tried to make it, had failed, and, plagued by overdue alimony and child support payments, had reluctantly grabbed the golden ring Wells Fargo offered. In all likelihood Victor had had help, but no one could prove it. The only certainty was that as the case went on more and more cops came to like Victor Manuel Gerena. Even on the run, the guy with the "dancing green eyes" managed to make friends.

Perhaps it was the amount of time officers invested. You're bound to get close to a guy if you live, eat, and sleep his case for weeks on end. Or perhaps it was empathy for a kid who had been treated harshly by the system? Contrary to one popular stereotype, many West Hartford officers had a sophisticated understanding of and compassion for the problems of minority citizens. Conceivably, the cops' high regard for Victor stemmed from respect. "This kid has everybody stymied," said one officer, "you have to give him credit for that." Or it could have been the testimony of one person after another. Nobody had anything bad to say about Victor, and along with everybody else, the police came to like him.

Whatever the causal factors involved, in long hours spent with the police, I never heard anyone say Gerena did this or Gerena did that. From the outset Victor was always on a first-name basis with every cop and agent who worked the case. Indeed, to hear officers talk, you'd have thought they were searching for a close friend who had become a missing person. And no one felt worse about Victor's disappearance than Lt. Anthony Duffy.

Duffy was West Hartford's man in charge of the Wells Fargo case. He'd been, by his own guileless admission, an "Irish cop" for more than twenty-seven years, and he thoroughly loved his work because it perfectly suited his personality. Duffy is bright, honest, dedicated, and arguably one of the most affable men on earth. Anyone who walks into his office is immediately asked, "Can I get you a cup of coffee?" and if the respondent, whether friend or

criminal, answers yes, Duffy runs quickly down the hall to fill his customer's order. Cohorts kiddingly call him Monty Hall—after coffee with a suspected felon, Duffy often extends an offer: "Let's make a deal"—but behind the smile is another smile. Duffy likes people so much he will happily (and intelligently) talk to almost anybody, about almost anything.

Duffy relishes a puzzle, which was why Victor had quickly become an obsession with him. Tony Duffy couldn't figure out how Victor Gerena had gotten away: "I mean, the robbery was a cinch, but the clean getaway, now that took some doing." He would endlessly roll over possibilities with anyone willing to play "How did Victor do it?" Duffy felt certain that Victor had had help, but the nuts and bolts of the getaway were driving him crazy. Where did he get the other car? What did he do with a half-ton of cash? Why use handcuffs stamped "Made in Spain"? He wanted to catch Victor because that's what cops were supposed to do, and he wanted to catch Victor because he wanted "to sit down face-to-face with the guy" and hash out the how's of the robbery. "I mean, I like Victor, and I know that I'll someday get the chance to have him tell me how and why he took the money."

Although Duffy wanted that chance to be tomorrow, leads were still in short supply, so he and Jim Millan tried to squeeze information out of the one man they felt might know something. The subject in question was twenty-nine-year-old Cesar Carmona. Carmona had known Victor for years—they had first met when Victor was doing volunteer voter registration work in 1976—and the two men hit it off so well that Cesar ultimately became the godfather of one of Victor's daughters. In the minds of most Americans, godfather is a nominal title: You go to a christening, and that's it. But in Puerto Rican culture, the godfather is traditionally an important figure. Victor's choice indicated not only his affection but his respect for Cesar Carmona.

When officers first questioned Cesar two days after the robbery, he told them he couldn't believe Victor had taken the money, but if he had, it was "for the good of others." Victor would have done it as a "Robin Hood gesture," and the money would probably be used for what Victor might consider a good cause. What would that be? Cesar had no idea. He knew Victor had "strong feelings for the Puerto Rican independence movement," but he did not know of any organization to which Victor be-

longed, and he had never heard Gerena's name associated with any radical Puerto Rican movement. Cesar only suggested a cause because that was Victor's nature. He genuinely wanted to help others, especially Puerto Ricans.

The police had already heard this kind of thing from others. What set Carmona apart was a phone call from Victor and a police record chock full of self-assertion. Cesar told the police that the night before the robbery, Victor had called his house, "but I was not available and Victor had left a message for me [Cesar] that he wanted to borrow my pickup truck." Since Victor had done this many times before, Carmona thought nothing of it, but loud sirens went off in Duffy's and Millan's minds. They knew Victor had had trouble with the Buick, which meant he had called his friend because he needed a backup vehicle. That much seemed certain. What remained up in the air was the possible role of Cesar Carmona. Did he know about the robbery beforehand? Or was he just an innocent bystander being used by a close friend?

To answer this question, police checked Carmona's past. Once again sirens rang: Cesar had a long record dating back to his seventeenth birthday. But—this was the gap in the police's reasoning—Cesar's arrests revolved around community, and more specifically Puerto Rican, activism. To walk the streets of Hartford with Cesar Carmona is to stroll with the unofficial, unelected, highly popular mayor of the Puerto Rican community. Carmona says *hola* (hello) to everybody, and his enthusiasm, what Americans used to call the booster spirit, is infectious. He clearly loves his people, and if his arrests date back to age seventeen, his activism was already evident in grammar school. The 1968 yearbook from St. Augustine's Elementary School contains this testimonial from an interested teacher: "To Cesar, spokesman for the common man and lawyer for any good cause. Best wishes and good luck. Brother Kevin."

Cesar's weakness is his temper. He gets hot under the collar quickly, and when you combine that trait with community activism, the result is a series of arrests, for anything from breach of peace to inciting to riot.

But Carmona did have a record. And he had received a call from Victor the night before the robbery. That was enough for Jim Millan who, on October 5, 1983, went to visit Carmona at his place of employment, the United States Post Office. The visit

quickly angered Carmona because the police knew where he lived: "They could have contacted me at home, but they tried to put pressure on me by coming to work. That was unnecessary and embarrassing because the boss thought I had done something wrong."

Jim Millan immediately pushed Cesar on the phone call. Officers not only didn't believe his denials, they wanted him to come —right away—and take a lie detector test. At first Cesar hesitated. But he called a lawyer friend who offered this advice: If he wanted the cops to disappear, he might as well take the test. He had nothing to hide and with $7 million on the line, the police naturally had to run down every conceivable lead. Millan and company would be back if Cesar refused.

The test was administered at the West Hartford station by two FBI specialists. They wired Cesar up, and once the preliminaries (name, address, etc.) were over, they got down to business. Had Cesar known about the robbery beforehand? Had he helped Victor steal the money? Did he have any of the money? Did he know how Victor had gotten away? The questions came rat-tat-tat, and then, with the wording slightly changed, agents asked the same questions a second and even a third time. The idea was to catch Cesar off guard, but all the agents did was light his fuse. As Carmona accurately tells it, every time he answered a second or third time, agents presented him with disappointed expressions. Cesar was supposedly failing the test, and the worried looks were the FBI's feigned expressions of concern. They could help Cesar out of this jam (that is, his supposedly false statements), but only if he offered to help them with Victor. What did he know? And wasn't it about time he bared his soul?

Cesar answered with a "to hell with you" attitude. He had done what they had asked and that was the end of it. If they had any evidence of wrongdoing, "issue a warrant and arrest me. Otherwise I'm leaving." Angered by what he perceived to be harassment, he walked out of the station, got a cab, and went back to work.

Meanwhile, Millan and Duffy examined the test results, which showed no evidence of lying. At certain points, the FBI testers "weren't happy with his responses"; that was one reason they pushed him so hard, and that's why Duffy and Millan again stopped by Carmona's home. One mid-October evening they came without warning or invitation and, technically, without

cause. Cesar was all the cops had, but when they once again tried to squeeze him, he once again told them "to get out of my face." This "bullshit" had to stop: Carmona declared that if the police wanted to come back, they must do it with a warrant for his arrest or not at all.

Armed with nothing but their suspicions, Millan and Duffy had to back off. They left Carmona alone until, roughly two months later, they saw him in court. Cesar had been charged with a breach of peace violation; he was, as was usual for him, acting as his own counsel, and when the court broke for a short recess, Millan and Duffy asked him to come upstairs.* They thought they could help him with his problem.

Once the three men sat down, Duffy's Monty Hall side took over. He offered to have the breach of peace charges dropped if Carmona would talk about Victor. "Tell us what you know and you walk out of here problem free." This offer naturally appealed to Carmona, but he believed he had done nothing wrong. He didn't know anything about the robbery's details, and even if he did, he could never be a squealer. Cesar went back to court, only to find that the charges had been dropped. He was free to go ("I split, man"), but not until he had had one more talk with Duffy and Millan. They were waiting for him outside the courthouse, and this time they offered money, $350,000 to be exact. This was the reward for Victor's capture, which Cesar could have if he would only tell the authorities what they were sure he knew.

At this point Cesar's mischievous side took charge. He played along by asking this question: What good would it do him to have the cash when, as Millan and Duffy well knew, "I'd never live to spend it. I'd be dead minutes after I got the cash." That was true if Cesar accepted the reward money from Wells Fargo. However, the FBI always had informant, or, more accurately, bribe money readily available, and Carmona would live to spend it because the FBI could place him in a protected witness program. He could literally take the money and run.

Carmona said no. He'd only wanted to see how far the police would go, and now that he knew, he again said good-bye to Millan and Duffy, who had never really expected him to accept their offer. "He wasn't that kind of man," said Duffy, "but in this period of the investigation we were offering the money to almost

*In West Hartford, the police station is adjacent to the courthouse.

everyone we talked to." It was, after all, the best calling card the police had. With no solid leads left, it was perhaps the only way anyone would catch Victor Gerena and, as most people believed, the helpers he surely had had.

While police checked and rechecked the evidence and interviews they had, cranks and pranksters continued to pester the authorities. Over at the Culbro Industrial Park, the site of the Wells Fargo depot, employees of another park business had devilishly invented a new game. They would press the Wells Fargo doorbell, screaming at whomever answered the intercom, "Can Victor come out and play?"

Wells Fargo soon closed its West Hartford branch. The company apparently wanted to forget its embarrassment, while over at the West Hartford police station, Tony Duffy discovered that two pranksters had actually enlisted God in the search for Victor Gerena. On audio tapes that run for well over an hour, one fellow screams like an evangelist, while the other whispers like a dying patient. The evangelist gives no name as he struggles to pull the information from Brother John's stubborn mind. "You're being put to the test. Wells Fargo wants some kind of proof, so what can you tell us?" Not much at first, because Brother John is apparently in pain. He almost seems to be crying at one point, and once the crying ends, John furiously rubs his hands, perhaps to light a spark. Then in a weak, almost hoarse voice, Brother John tells this story. Victor has lost a considerable amount of weight, "easily fifteen to twenty pounds." Worry about being caught has taken its toll, but the money lies in a basement safe in—John is almost crying again—"in a thirty-four-unit, wooden hotel in San Juan. The hotel has a large white veranda, it's located between two skyscrapers, and its name [this delivered in a perfectly serious tone of voice] is La, La, La Cracha, no, no, La, La, La Crock!"

A crock it was, but as Tony Duffy dutifully listened to each tape received he and Jim Millan had no way of knowing that Puerto Rican FBI agents had stumbled upon a clue that would ultimately lead them to the real motive for, and cause of, the Wells Fargo "expropriation."

On Sunday evening, October 30, 1983, somebody took a law rocket—an antitank weapon—and fired it at the Federal Building in Hato Rey.* The rocket was meant to be aimed at the FBI

*Hato Rey is San Juan's Manhattan. It's full of office buildings and high-rise apartments.

offices housed in the Federal Building, but, given few good assault points, the weapon was fired at the opposite side of the building, where, instead of the FBI, it wiped out portions of the Department of Agriculture. Despite this mistake, a Puerto Rican independence group, Los Macheteros, took credit for a successful attack. They were protesting the American invasion of another Caribbean island, Grenada, and even though they missed one of the most obvious symbols of the American colonial presence, Los Macheteros called the attack a stunning success.

In private, however, Los Macheteros were very critical of the operation they code-named La Guillotina. The two men who had fired the rocket had failed to use the agreed-upon escape route, they had left two automobiles too close to the Federal Building, and, most crucial of all, they had used legal cars. This surprised the revolutionaries who engaged in the postattack analysis; while they praised the attackers for a successful assault on the hated American presence, they cautioned against the use of legal cars in any future operations. Employing vehicles legitimately and normally driven by group members risked leaving the authorities with clues that could, given a little sleuthing, spell trouble for Los Macheteros.

More than the independentistas knew—as they secretly engaged in precisely recorded bouts of self-criticism, FBI agents quickly made use of the clues offered by the legal cars. One lead soured because the man who had purchased a 1968 Impala for $400 in Lares did not reregister the car in his own name. But, stuck in an odds-and-ends compartment of the vinyl door of the other vehicle, a 1976 Chevrolet Blazer, agents found the numbered portions of a traffic citation. It had been issued to Pedro Almodova Rivera, a man whose driver's license indicated that he lived—ironically, for a man who fought against American colonialism—in a place called Levittown, Puerto Rico. Agents immediately staked out the Levittown address, and to their amazement and delight, they discovered that Almodova was an alias: Walking into the Levittown apartment was none other than Filiberto Ojeda Rios, the alleged coordinator of at least five Puerto Rican independence groups, and a man the FBI had been chasing for thirteen years. Now, because of one slipup, the Feds had their man.

But they didn't arrest him. Instead, betting that their leader would guide the FBI to many, perhaps even most, of his fellow

nationalists, agents soon began an around-the-clock surveillance of Ojeda's residence. "No bust until its time," was how Lon Lacey put it, as he and other agents coordinated an operation that eventually used fixed surveillance (from an apartment near Ojeda's) seven days a week, and moving surveillance (in cars, on foot, in planes) six days a week for months on end.

Nobody knew about Victor when the stakeouts began. Agents watched Ojeda because his revolutionary politics made him an implacable opponent of the American presence in Puerto Rico; because he was reputedly a Cuban intelligence agent; and, finally, because Los Macheteros was one of the few groups the FBI *already* had on full-investigation status. Island agents had clocked independentistas for years; when bureau personnel finally had a chance to focus their microscopes on Ojeda, they understandably keyed on the island. Agents had no idea a rocket attack by Puerto Rican nationalists would lead them to Hartford, and even less of a notion that the Wells Fargo robbery would soon become the bureau's only means of prosecuting Puerto Rico's independentistas.

But that's what happened. And to understand how and why, we'll leave Tony Duffy in West Hartford—until mid-1984 no local cop knew about the Macheteros connection—and turn instead to the perpetual war between the FBI, acting as agents of federal authority, and Los Macheteros, acting as agents of the Puerto Rican revolution. To the latter a robbery is a legitimate expropriation, and to the former an independentista is a cold-blooded terrorist.

It's a war in which, English and Spanish aside, the two groups speak very different languages.

3

The FBI vs. Los Macheteros

QUITE UNINTENTIONALLY, the FBI and Los Macheteros are locked in a battle that gives rise to one of the paradoxes of modern politics. Progressives (sometimes called liberals) have no trouble with allowing the federal government substantial power when it comes to protecting civil rights, but if at issue is a threat to domestic security, they prefer to put a tight rein on the agents of federal authority. Even if the group posing a threat openly advocate violent activity, liberals or progressives often criticize the use of wiretaps or surveillance. When it comes to defying the government, many liberals argue that the right to protest takes precedence over the agents' power to protect the community from the violence these groups can cause.

Conservatives, on the other hand, continually decry the ever-increasing powers of the federal government, yet they have no trouble granting enormous leeway to that government when the issue is subversive or, even worse, Communist activity. In 1987 the FBI can routinely allow its informants "to participate in criminal activities" (if agents deem it necessary to obtain information), and conservatives rarely see a problem with letting the agents of law enforcement break the law. The conservative's laudable concern for curbing state power is absent when the FBI is trying to catch what conservatives say are threats to domestic security.

These contradictions are important because they underline the dilemmas inherent in any domestic security investigation: How does a country balance the rights of protesters against the rights of the community they mean to change or the government they seek to overturn? This is such a ticklish question that until very recently Americans gave the FBI no specific domestic security guidelines. Indeed, while liberals and conservatives complained about each other's abuses, the agency operated in such a state of relative normlessness that, when asked to justify particular investigations—say of Puerto Rican nationalists in the 1950s

and 1960s—the FBI often cited the following precedent:

In 1936 President Franklin Roosevelt, a liberal, was worried about the growing influence of America's Communists and Fascists. So he asked J. Edgar Hoover for help. Initially the FBI chief could offer none because statutes then in force confined the FBI "to the detection and prosecution of crimes." The FBI couldn't get involved unless Director Hoover found a loophole, which he promptly discovered in a dusty law passed in 1916. If the State Department asked the bureau to investigate domestic security problems, then the agency could legally watch anybody the Secretary designated a potential threat.

Hoover told Roosevelt to tell Secretary of State Cordell Hull to tell Hoover to investigate the Communists and Fascists, which, according to Hoover, is exactly what Roosevelt did. Unfortunately, historians have to take Hoover's word about this because neither Roosevelt nor Hull left a formal record of their request to the FBI's director, Only Hoover thought to leave a written record of his meetings with the president and secretary of state, and it is his summary of Roosevelt's request that has remained the cornerstone of the FBI's claims to a legitimate involvement in domestic security investigations.[1]

Of course, as the potential for war became a terrible reality, Director Hoover got formal confirmation of the bureau's role in, first, monitoring and, later, apprehending persons perceived as threats to domestic security. But, as with the informal basis for his initial involvement, the director never received a set of guidelines that clearly indicated what he and his agents could and could not do. Under any circumstances, a lack of checks and balances can be dangerous, but given Director Hoover's beliefs, ambitions, prestige, and incredible longevity in office, the potential for abuse became an institutionalized reality. With programs like Cointelpro (counterintelligence operations begun in the 1950s and ended in 1971), the FBI not only targeted threats to domestic security but spied on virtually anyone who openly questioned government policies and practices. And at Director Hoover's urging, bureau personnel used means that were generally seedy and at times downright unscrupulous.

Consider the program in Puerto Rico, interesting in its own right but especially important because I have never met a Macheteros who was not intimately familiar with the policies and practices of J. Edgar Hoover. Macheteros remember, and twenty

years later they call the FBI "the enemy" in a tone of voice that translates into hate.

It was 1960 when Director Hoover wrote this memo to the Special-Agent-in-Charge (SAC) of the bureau's San Juan office: "I want you to be advised that a more positive effort must be made not only to curtail but to actively disrupt the activities of Puerto Rican nationalists." Island agents had allowed peaceful groups to operate without incident for too long. Hoover suggested that, to undermine the dangerous current of nationalism, "the following tactics be employed: The use of informants to disrupt the movement and create dissension within the groups . . . the use of handwritten letters to plant the seeds of suspicion between various factions . . . the use of anonymous mailings concerning Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States to be sent to subjects within the independence movement who may be psychologically affected by such information."

It was such an appealing plan that, two days later, Hoover got this reply from San Juan's SAC: "These suggestions are just the beginning and they in no way cover the vast field of possibilities in the counterintelligence program." For example, agents sent unsigned letters to Movement for Independence members about the supposed sexual behavior of their leader Juan Mari Bras. The letter said, "If you are too much of a fool to resent being a cuckold, I as a friend will not allow it to go on. If you will not stop this, I will expose this fat clown to all, including our friends in the press."

Or what about "snitch jacketing"? In this case FBI agents planted what appeared to be an informer's report in Mari's car. The report was supposedly signed by one of his underlings who, thanks to the FBI, could never be fully trusted again.

As a final example, take Mari's heart attack. While agents couldn't be sure they had caused the nationalist leader's hospitalization, they knew what would score points in Washington, and Director Hoover soon received a memo expressing his agents "pleasure" at the positive effects (that is, the heart attack) of the bureau's threatening phone calls and personal harassment.[2]

Throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, Puerto Ricans complained about the FBI's "outrageous" behavior. But few people listened until the accumulation of abuses, for example, those against Martin Luther King and other black leaders, became an

American scandal. As legislators saw what a lack of checks and balances had produced, the FBI got, for the first time, a set of precise guidelines for domestic security work.

Introduced by Attorney General Edward H. Levi on March 10, 1976, the regulations recognized three types of legitimate investigation—preliminary, limited, and full—and, in each instance, the proven level of threat determined the techniques that could be employed. For example, in a preliminary investigation, agents could examine public records and talk to "previously established informants," but wiretaps were forbidden and physical surveillance possible "only for the limited purpose of identifying the subject of an investigation."[3]

Many agents welcomed the Levi guidelines. Lon Lacey, the SAC tracking Victor in Connecticut, said, "The Levi rules finally furnished a means for the FBI to avoid unfair criticism." Yes, "There had been problems," but were they caused by bureau callousness or by the absence of clear and specific guidelines? Lacey said it was the latter, because until Attorney General Levi wrote a rule book, agents operated in a void. Anything was legitimate because nothing was illegitimate.

Whatever the case, media attention, stimulated by the issuance of the Levi guidelines, forced the FBI to virtually shut down its domestic security operations. From an incredible 21,414 investigations in July 1973, the FBI had reduced its caseload to 102 by February 1978, and shortly before the Wells Fargo robbery occurred, the FBI had only thirty-eight probes under way. Over a period of ten years, the FBI had eliminated 99.8 percent of its domestic security work, yet, as new bureau Director William Webster told Congress, there was no need for public concern since "much of what we were collecting was of almost no value to the bureau." Arguably the material might have been of value to other federal agencies, but that wasn't the bureau mission. Webster's FBI existed to track and catch people who broke the law, and it wasn't his fault if there were only thirty-eight potential threats in the entire country.[4]

Actually thirty-eight is an exaggerated number because most of the investigations under way in September 1983 were preliminary or limited probes. Nationwide only eight groups merited full-investigation status, and since five of the eight were Puerto Rican organizations—Los Macheteros, the FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation), FARP (Armed Forces of the Popular

Resistance), MLN (Movement for National Liberation), and COR (Committee of Revolutionary Workers)*—the post-Hoover FBI could apparently prove that, instead of Communism, the greatest threat to the domestic security of the United States came from a small island sixteen hundred miles off America's shores.[5]

Proof was an absolute prerequisite for any full investigation. The Levi guidelines stipulated that unless agents had "specific and articuable facts" showing that a group meant to overthrow the government of the United States, or at least substantially impair its functioning, no full investigation was permissible. Only the gravest, provable threats led to a full-scale probe. In the case of Los Macheteros, proof came easy because the group readily provided it. For example, at roughly 1:30 A.M. on January 12, 1981, a series of explosions rocked the Muñoz Air National Guard Base at Carolina, Puerto Rico. Nine guard aircraft were destroyed, two on loan from the U.S. Air Force also received a substantial battering, and, if accountants included the two trucks that were totally destroyed, damages came to $50 million. That was bad news for the United States, but great news for Los Macheteros, who quickly took credit for the attack. Indeed, following a practice already many incidents old, group members left a machete with a flag at the airport, while the next day they used a United Press International reporter to tell the world "Los Macheteros did it."

With that much damage, linked to a public admission of guilt, the FBI could easily—and correctly—show that Los Macheteros meant to "substantially impair" the functioning of the U.S. government. The attorney general ordered a full-scale investigation and, once a group got that kind of attention, the Levi guidelines said "Go for it." Tracking Los Macheteros, agents could legitimately use informants to gather information, could employ mail covers to monitor written communications, could bug anything from cars to public telephones, and, if need be, could allow informants to commit "serious crimes."

The wraps came off when the full-scale flag went up, but despite the authority, the bureau still treaded lightly. If you talk to a guy like Lon Lacey or Jim Millan, you quickly discover an agent acutely sensitive to criticism of the bureau's past. Since these loyal Americans resent being classed as "agents of repression," in any investigation of Los Macheteros, they and their

*The other groups under full-investigation status were the Arizona Chapter of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the May 19th Organization, and the Jewish Defense League.

colleagues mean to erase the stigma attached to the Hoover era. In the new FBI, G-men are the pros who use their top-notch educations to, first, monitor and, only when they have dotted every *i* and crossed every *t* in the rule book, to apprehend congressionally agreed-upon threats to the nation's domestic security.

In late 1983, the FBI craved the approval of the American people. Equally important, since agents knew that any full-scale investigation would be closely scrutinized by Congress and the press, they were in no hurry to arrest Ojeda Rios after they discovered the ticket he had left in the door of the Chevrolet Blazer. Why rush when the bureau already had legitimate authority to use a wide variety of "no holds barred" tactics, and when, with patience and a few breaks, agents could play by the rules and still collar their man, plus as many of his compatriots as the guidelines allowed?

"No bust until its time." Those were Lon Lacey's orders as he and his colleagues tried to muster the proof needed to put independentistas where the FBI said they belonged: behind bars. For a long time.

Like the FBI, Los Macheteros remembered the past. But instead of trying to forget or erase it, group members demanded that history be used like a branding iron. Through lectures and revolutionary literature, accurate knowledge of FBI abuses was so deeply burned into a person's consciousness that listeners and readers quickly made the bureau the most hated symbol of America's colonial presence. In conversation, nothing produced as much contempt as mention of the FBI—an example is this paraphrase of a slogan often heard: "The Revolution Is Alive and Well, The FBI Can Go to Hell"—so it is no surprise that when they sought to assert themselves, Los Macheteros fired that law rocket at the bureau's Puerto Rican headquarters.

The FBI is Public Enemy Number One. But standing right behind the bureau is the president, Congress, the U.S. military (which controls roughly 13 percent of Puerto Rico's land), and any other representative of American federal authority.

Los Macheteros are at war with the United States. And they have been ever since the group was founded on July 26, 1976.

Three men—Filiberto Ojeda Rios, then 43, Juan Enrique Segarra, then 25, and Orlando Gonzalez Claudio, then 28—came

together on the anniversary of the Yankee invasion of their homeland on July 26, 1898, and declared war on any agent of American political, economic, or military authority. To these men the United States never had, and never would have, the slightest shred of legitimate authority over any Puerto Rican's life. To take back what was rightfully theirs, they formed a revolutionary organization dedicated to the elimination—peacefully if possible, through violence if necessary—of any American presence on Puerto Rican soil.

Of the three men, Ojeda had the strongest revolutionary credentials. "Filiberto is a legend," said one fellow, and nationalists speak of him in whispered tones, not to evade FBI wiretaps, but to show their respect and admiration for a man who breathes Puerto Rican pride and defiance in his every movement. Born in 1933, Ojeda entered the University of Puerto Rico in 1948, at the height of the exceedingly violent controversy over the island's ultimate political status.* He'd worked for independence, and when that effort failed, Ojeda Rios dedicated his life to the elimination of any alien authority on the four islands that together comprise Puerto Rico. Ojeda had trained in Cuba—which led the FBI to suggest he was a Castro stooge—he'd helped organize many anti-American activities in the United States, and, back home at last, he wanted to create an organization that would shatter the myth of political impotence. Puerto Ricans could fight the United States and win if they listened to the clarion call that would soon come from the machete wielders of, not Puerto Rico, but Boriquén, the country's original Indian name.

Ojeda's compatriots had also grown up during tumultuous times. Besides the perpetual battle called Puerto Rican politics, they'd come to political maturity during the time when American blacks fought for civil rights, women fought for equal rights, and students fought for every right. Juan Segarra, for example, had attended and graduated from Harvard during a time when the idealistic, infectious atmosphere of student protest produced an endless stream of long-haired radicals. He'd seen Black Panthers and Young Lords, hippies and Maoists struggle for their version of the future.

As a means of getting the attention of the people, Los Macheteros staged a series of "commando actions" soon after they came together as a group. But as their present leader Victor Acosta (a pseudonym) is quick to point out, the group always acted in response to the perceived injustices of illegitimate authority. Because they wanted to show people that the United States could be beaten, or because they wanted to counter "the demoralizing effects of FBI intelligence activities," Los Macheteros openly announced their participation in retaliatory *acciones de propaganda armada* (actions of armed propaganda). They killed because they wanted to show the Puerto Rican people how to achieve freedom, and while they got their point across, they also opened a debate that I soon discovered was at the center of the Wells Fargo robbery.

What's a freedom fighter? What's a terrorist? And what's a Machetero?

To answer these questions, one must consider the Macheteros attack at Sebana Seca on December 9, 1979. It typifies the machete wielders in action; it caused the FBI to greatly intensify their search for group members; and it was in retaliation for a situation that—for the group—precisely symbolized the root causes of the ninety-year-old Puerto Rican independence movement.

At roughly 6:30 A.M., a Navy bus—the yellow model used by school systems all over the United States—took eighteen American sailors to a communications base near San Juan. Following its normal routine, the bus slowly bounced through the tree-lined streets when a beat-up delivery truck swerved in front of it, forcing the bus to a screeching halt. The driver, a twenty-nine-year-old petty officer named John Ball, probably cursed the idiots in the delivery truck, but if he did, they were his last words. When four men leaped out of a white panel truck parked nearby —the truck prominently displayed a sticker that read "Puerto Rico for Christ"—they immediately opened fire on the bus and its eighteen unarmed occupants. Ball died instantly, as did twenty-year-old Emil White, and although ten other sailors received wounds, at least they escaped the ultimate penalty reserved for anyone dressed in such provocative clothing: the uniform of the United States Navy.[6]

Along with another nationalist group (the Organization of Volunteers for the Puerto Rican Revolution), Los Macheteros quickly claimed credit for the attack. It was "eye for an eye"

*Until 1948, the United States had appointed Puerto Rico's governors. In 1948 the island had its first gubernatorial election. The more important issue on the ballot was the future political status of the Puerto Rican people.

justice, since prison authorities in Tallahassee, Florida, acting on the CIA's orders, had recently "murdered" Angel Rodriguez Cristobal. Guards said Angel, found hanging in his cell, had committed suicide, but when photographs showed a man who had been beaten to a pulp, Angel's friends asked this question: Did he beat himself up before he committed suicide or was he first tortured and then left to hang like a piece of uncooked meat? Los Macheteros said Angel had been murdered because his organization openly supported all activities of the island's clandestine groups, and because, with his death, "the CIA hoped to create a provocation . . . that would facilitate penetration or capture of Macheteros, Volunteers, or, on the mainland, members of the FALN."

The connection between the murdered Angel and the U.S. Navy lies in the cause of Angel's imprisonment. Along with a number of other island activists, he had participated in a civil disobedience activity, a "beach-in," on Vieques, a small island—four miles wide by twenty miles long—easily spotted from the tip of the Puerto Rican mainland. What the Navy does there is one of the very few things uniting islanders of every political persuasion. Even statehooders call Americans "colonialists" when the subject is Vieques. A signs at the entrance to a sport shop on the island reads: "MARINES. NAVY. Please shop elsewhere. We don't want your business."

Vieques is an island that fulfills the claims of the most exaggerated travel brochure. Down roads narrow by even Puerto Rican standards, visitors encounter seemingly endless rows of wild hibiscus, which dominate the landscape. In contrast to overdeveloped Luquillo Beach on the Puerto Rican mainland, Vieques' Sun Bay's roughly two-mile stretch of beach holds only one maintenance building. By local standards, Sun Bay is crowded if the glistening stretch of white sand contains more than ten or twenty people. Vieques is a magnificent anachronism, except for one problem: The United States Navy owns or controls 75 percent of Vieques, and, on the average, the Navy drops 3,400 bombs a month on the shores and sands of this tropical paradise.[7]

In 1941, war seemed imminent and the United States needed Caribbean bases if it was to effectively protect the Panama Canal, so the Navy acquired one-third of Vieques by condemning it. Flying the flag of national security, the Navy bought land from

sugar planters who had been ruined, first, by the depression and, second, by competition from American growers of the sugar beet. In peacetime, planters might have resisted the Navy's condemnation orders, but after Pearl Harbor opposition was, if not unthinkable, at least more difficult to justify. Sailors took over, they relocated (on Navy property) the eight hundred families who lived on the land, and they parceled out new lots with the "stipulation that tenants could be required to vacate within thirty days and that they could not transfer lots."

Vieques had a new boss but, according to what Puerto Ricans were originally told, the Navy would leave once the United States had won the war. No one planned a perpetual stay, just a short stopover on the road to total victory.

After the war, the Navy, backed by the president and Congress, overlooked what it had told the people of Vieques. With the United States now a great world power, sailors had to be ready for anything. Vieques was a perfect spot to practice war, and, with Puerto Rican residents not allowed to vote in national elections, political fallout would be minimal. Since no Americans wanted bases in their neighborhood, it was much easier to practice war in Puerto Rico. Nobody asked the Marshall Islanders if they wanted to use Bikini and Rongelap for A-bomb tests, and nobody cared if Puerto Ricans opposed making Vieques an "unrestricted weapons training complex."

The Navy kept buying land. They made one side of the island an ammunition storage area, while the other side became the target area, close to the Marine maneuver area. More or less in the middle was the 25 percent of Vieques allotted to the public. That's the hibiscus garden previously described, and it's all Viequesans have left of their island. The Navy allows cows to graze on its land, but the cows have to be careful because, despite claims that nobody's in danger, the Navy maintains a fifteen-mile buffer zone between people and the targets bombers try to hit.

For the Navy, Vieques is *the* Atlantic Weapons Training Facility. As government documents show, sailors use the island to schedule and conduct "naval gunfire support and air-to-ground ordnance delivery training for 96 Atlantic Fleet ships, 30 NATO ships, more than 450 fighter planes, and smaller air units from Great Britain and the Puerto Rican National Guard." Everybody aims at Vieques because ships or planes assigned "shore bombardment operational capability" have to maintain "gunfire sup-

port qualifications." An officer directs the exercises from a spot called Cerro Matias. He's in voice contact with the bombardiers, and, once they fire, another group of sailors tallies up the ship's score. You qualify if you hit or get close enough to the target and, if not, you try again.

Ship bombardment occurs roughly once every three days, but during fleet maneuvers, usually held in February, the island often receives more than two thousand rounds of eighty-pound bombs a day. Only eight of the eighty pounds are explosives, and Vieques has only nineteen two-thousand-round days a year, but, by anybody's standards, that's a lot of bombing.

Aircraft "arrive in groups of 50 to 70 per air wing and remain for training an average of ten to fourteen days." They practice dive-bombing, low-level attacks, strafing, and mining exercises. These activities currently take place on about 115 days a year, "although an average month would be little more than nine days (or 102 hours) with about 2,500 bombs being expended, peak months account for 22 days (268 hours) and over 7,600 bombs dropped, while other months may not have any training. The number of live bombs dropped per month varies from zero to 1,000 with an average of almost 400."

American and foreign marine forces also use the maneuver areas for "amphibious landings, small arms and artillery practice, and combat engineering." The amount of training time varies, but in recent years Marines "fired over 30,000 rounds carrying over 100 tons of explosives, and amphibious landings took place on 31 days."

By the mid-1970s naval activities on Vieques had provoked a virtually unprecedented political situation: agreement among Puerto Ricans of every political persuasion. To statehooders, Populares (who more or less favor the present Commonwealth status), and independentistas alike, Vieques perfectly symbolized Puerto Rico's colonial status. Representatives of the United States might tell the United Nations that Puerto Rico was in control of its own affairs, but when it came to Vieques, a large majority of islanders openly refused to accept American claims. Unlike the tariff issue* or even conscription without the right to vote, the bombardment of Vieques was a loud and continuous assault on everyone's intelligence. How could any self-respecting politician claim to be in control of even local affairs when, despite protests,

*Puerto Rico is subject to the same tariff rules that apply to all states in the Union.

the Navy not only continued its bombing but actually increased the level of activity?

Statehooders initially led the Puerto Rican opposition to Vieques. Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo first complained in meetings with Navy officials, and when that effort produced no results, Romero sued the United States of America. He tried to enjoin the Navy's activities, but the federal courts underlined Puerto Rico's status when they refused to challenge the ultimate authority of American officials. "Being that the final mission in combat is the delivery of live ordnance to the enemy, it is essential to training that personnel be fully exposed to its use, both psychologically and in terms of actual skills. Vieques is the only location presently available wherein this training can be conducted within permissible peacetime parameters."[8]

Now the Navy did have an alternative facility: Bloodsworth Island in the Chesapeake Bay. But the Navy said it was hard to conduct coordinated activities on Bloodsworth, and even more important, the island was closed three months of the year "to provide habitat for migratory waterfowl." Rather than upset the birds, the courts upset Puerto Ricans, who had worked within the system only to have the system deny the claim that Puerto Ricans controlled their own political and social affairs.

This is when, in 1978, activists decided to imitate Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Near buildings whose walls still carry lettering that reads GIVE US BACK OUR BEACH, demonstrators dared the Navy to land its ships and men. Puerto Ricans such as Angel Rodriguez occupied the shoreline. They were promptly arrested, and in another perceived insult to the dignity of the nationalists, Rodriguez was sent to a federal prison in a foreign country, that is, the United States of America. While there, Los Macheteros closely monitored his treatment. They never believed a word of the suicide explanation—why was his body so battered?—and they vowed to get even.

The incident at Sebana Seca and the deaths of the two unarmed sailors were acts of terrorism according to the FBI, because the use of "force or violence . . . in furtherance of political or social objectives" is terrorism. Terrorists deserve and get no quarter from the FBI, because terrorists refuse to recognize the limits of legitimate political dissent. Criticize, organize, march, but use "ufilawful force or violence" in pursuit of political aims and you are the worst sort of political animal: a terrorist.

Los Macheteros see it differently. Citing the definition used

by the 1979 Jerusalem Conference on International Terrorism ("Terrorism is the deliberate, systematic murder, maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear in order to gain political ends"), they stress that their aim has never been to frighten civilians or menace the innocent. On the contrary, it is only because they seek to generate pride and self-confidence in the Puerto Rican masses that Los Macheteros retaliate against agents or symbols of Yankee authority. Puerto Ricans are at war with the United States, and anyone who wears the military uniform of America's Navy or Army or Air Force is the enemy.

After thirty years of fighting, these were the granite battlelines each side had drawn as the FBI set out to first track and then prosecute Filiberto Ojeda Rios. Island agents wanted to nab a terrorist who said he was a freedom fighter, while in Hartford, agents were still trying to catch a thief who had never said a thing. In late 1983, neither FBI office knew exactly what the other was up to, but once they found out, a supposedly isolated robbery quickly became one more crime in a seven-year string of "terrorist" actions. Interested parties such as myself were trying to understand how a street-smart kid pulled off the Big Sleep Heist when the actual question was why a young Puerto Rican who had spent virtually no time on the island—Victor had been born in the Bronx and was raised in Hartford—would join a revolutionary organization dedicated to the violent overthrow of American political, economic, and military authority.

Despite my or Tony Duffy's pet theories, the Wells Fargo money would never be used to party in Rio de Janeiro, because Puerto Rican nationalists would spend it on the weapons needed to blow Americans off islands like Vieques.

That was the real story, which we had all missed. And if Ojeda hadn't left that ticket in the Blazer, the FBI, the West Hartford police, and a bunch of hungry reporters might still be looking for Victor the thief instead of Victor the machete wielder.

NOTES

1. Frank Donner, *The Age of Surveillance* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980), 52–60. Also Sanford Ungar, *The FBI* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976).
2. See, for example, Anne Nelson, *Murder Under Two Flags* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1986), especially 85–99. Also William Lichtenstein and David Winnhurst, "Red Alert in Puerto Rico," *The Nation* (June 30, 1979): 780–2.
3. See *Domestic Security (Levi) Guidelines,* Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 97th Congress, Second Session, 1982. Also *Impact of the Attorney General's Guidelines for Domestic Security Investigations (The Levi Guidelines),* Report of the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Committee on the Judiciary, Senate Report 98–134, November 1983.
4. Senate Report 98–134, 4–6.
5. *Domestic Security Guidelines,* 65–67. See also *Terrorist Activity: Cuban Connection in Puerto Rico, Castro's Hand in Puerto Rican and United States Terrorism,* Hearings of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Investigations, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 94th Congress, First Session, Part 6, July 30, 1975. Also FBI Oversight and Authorization, Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 98th Congress, First Session, 1983, 60–62.
6. See, for example, "Terrorism in Puerto Rico," *Newsweek* (December 17, 1979): 55.
7. On Vieques, (pages 60–63) see *Naval Training Activities on the Island of Vieques, Puerto Rico,* Report of the Panel to Review the Status of Naval Training Activities on the Island of Vieques, Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, February 3, 1981. Also *Report of the Inspection of United States Military Bases in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Panama Canal,* Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, Second Session, March 20, 1980, and Department of Defense Documents, *Department of Defense/General Electric Company, Partnership for Vieques Economic Development; The Defense Department's Economic Adjustment Plan* (No dates on either document, obtained while visiting Vieques).
8. *Naval Training Activities on the Island of Vieques, Puerto Rico,* p. 11.

4

New Paltz News

TO CATCH a Machetero the FBI pulled out all the stops. They wiretapped houses, cars, offices, businesses, and even the three public telephones across the street from the Ojeda Rios home. Agents—six or eight at a time—followed every potential Machetero they could find, while others, using the tools of the trade, squinted through vision-enhancing devices that documented that conversations had taken place, or if need be, took the pictures that would later be used in court.

No expense was too great, and none was spared in an investigation that ultimately cost roughly $8 million. That's more than Wells Fargo lost in the first place, but observers must remember the FBI's public posture. Victor was at the very top of the bureau's ten-most-wanted list, and, as of fiscal year 1983, Judge William Webster told the Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism that he had added terrorism "to the three previous priority one programs to form the new top-ranked national priority programs category which was now composed of foreign intelligence, organized crime, white collar crime, and terrorism." "Top-ranked national priority programs category" was the pigeonhole for Los Macheteros. In Spanish or English, the tongue-twisting phrase meant the same thing: Reagan hadn't cut the FBI's budget.

As the FBI slowly set its traps, those of us following the case in Hartford still knew nothing about the rocket attack or, for the FBI, its promising, top-priority consequences. The Wells Fargo case was at a standstill, with Tony Duffy and Jim Millan both scratching their heads, when, of all things, Victor audaciously sent one letter to Liza Soto and another to his mother. Both caught the authorities by surprise because island agents were not yet tapped into the Macheteros network.

Victor sent the letters to Liza's attorney, who received them on November 15, 1983. Mailed from Buffalo, they contained a

fictitious Hartford return address, and despite persistent claims of fraud from attorney Graham, the FBI quickly stamped the messages authentic. Agents never publicly said so, but Victor's fingerprints were on the envelope that contained the letters, and the handwriting ("open, looping letters, almost girlish; not small, crabbed, tight, sloppy, or hasty") perfectly matched samples the authorities already had on hand. Even an untrained eye could see that the same man had written these letters and one to Victor's wife, Pamela, dated April 23, 1977.

In the letter to his mother, Victor expressed his love and gratitude. "You have always been a tremendous mother to me. You showed me what it is to love and struggle for what one wants . . . For this and many other things, I will never forget you. You have earned the respect of the community not only as a mother but as a Puerto Rican woman." Gloria Gerena made Victor proud, and he wanted to reciprocate but, "since I am unable to erase what I have done, I cannot repent." He was sad because "now that I am able to help you economically, you cannot accept it . . . Don't be preoccupied with me. I am well for now . . . and I will always be thinking of you and the family. Your son for always, Victor."

To Mrs. Gerena the letter offered hope; at least her son was alive and well. To the police the letter offered another big zero. All Puerto Ricans loved their mothers, and if Victor put his on an especially high pedestal, what good did that do the cops? The letter contained no clues, and the twenty-five agents sent to comb the streets of Buffalo also found nothing. They showed Victor's picture to anyone willing to look, but even the color photo with a beard drawn in produced no results. People in Buffalo merely answered the agents' questions with one of their own: "Victor? Victor who?"

Liza's letter was different. It included the expected protestations of love ("I believe that you and I are one. . . . though I know you must have some feelings of resentment and abandonment because of my actions . . . But don't give up hope in me Liza. I will return for you when I think it is safe"), but smack in the middle of the letter was a clue the cops couldn't at first decipher. When Victor told Liza, "I am sorry I couldn't share with you my plans for the so-called Big Sleep Heist," police immediately focused on the gangster phrase but, despite being on every detective's tongue, nobody remembered where the phrase "The

Big Sleep Heist" had come from. The ever-efficient Millan sent a telex to every FBI office in the United States, but even that network produced nothing. The clue seemed like a hieroglyph until a Hartford reporter almost offhandedly told Duffy that it had been the headline of a *Boston Herald* story that appeared about three days after the robbery.

Victor was in Boston! Or at least he had been there, or close enough to read a paper that circulated only in the Boston area. Another possibility: Victor's accomplices lived in Boston, had read the story, and had passed on the phrase to Victor.

The Feds descended on Boston. Agents knew it was a long shot, but locals wanted to make up for their sloppy work—not one of Boston's thirty-odd FBI agents had responded to Millan's request for information—so they pushed hard for any trace of Victor, his accomplices, or the loot. Touting the reward and bribe money already refused in Hartford, officals hoped to lure a Puerto Rican informant, or anyone who could lead officials down a promising path. Nobody expected that Victor was still in Boston, but if he had somehow slipped up, or if the photos displayed in the media triggered a buried memory, officials might finally have something to work with.

It was humiliating, and frustrating, and borderline useless because, as one agent summed up the Boston and Buffalo manhunts, "Nothing. We still had nothing." All that effort, expense, and personnel produced no results, and tomorrow looked just as empty as yesterday and today. In West Hartford, Tony Duffy got ribbed by friends when he sat down for a drink ("What's the matter, Tony? The kid got you guys beat?"), so Duffy started making hundred-dollar bets that Victor would be caught by April or May or June. The wagers were a cheap way to momentarily shut up his buddies, and they also offered Duffy something Victor refused to provide: a tangible reason to continue what now appeared to be a dead-end search.

Not that Duffy or Millan or any agent slowed down his pace. According to regulations, Millan had the case until he retired, and by sheer desire Duffy had the case until he got that chance to sit down with Victor "and have him tell me how and why he took the money." But, trying to console himself as well as others, Duffy told anyone willing to listen, "We'll nab him soon," knowing all the while that he didn't believe his own energetic pep talks. In reality, after almost four months of fruitless work, a

significant break in the case was as likely as a successful political comeback by Jimmy Carter. Duffy was stuck, yet he'd been a cop too long not to know that sheer luck sometimes cracked the toughest cases. Thus, as one year rolled over into another, Duffy toasted persistence, brains, and "a break for the good guys." Maybe something would turn up. In any case, 1983 ended with Victor still on the run and the police nowhere in sight.

Or so Duffy, who had still never heard the word *machetero,* thought. In Puerto Rico, the bureau assigned a Mexican-American named Jose Rodriguez to act as case agent. He'd organized surveillance teams in late December and early January, which, beginning at 5:30 A.M. and ending at 11 or 11:30 P.M., kept an incredibly close watch on Ojeda Rios and his many visitors. At times agents risked bumping into one another, because often as many as six manned vehicles skulked around Ojeda's Levittown neighborhood. Agents passed one another all day long and, even when Ojeda's colleagues wisely used "dry cleaning" tactics (for example, the visitor would make a series of U-turns before actually stopping at the apartment, or if the visitor was especially careful, he or she would make a U-turn, park the car for a while, and then turn and stop again), the Feds apparently shifted gears at the right time. Nobody noticed the many tails because in his (bugged) apartment, his car (also bugged), or at the three public telephones across the street (all bugged), Ojeda and his companions openly discussed their past, present, and future political plans.

Since they used code names, it took Rodriguez and his men a while to compile their Machetero Who's Who. But agents had been tailing some of Ojeda's visitors since 1981,* and if past experience failed to label Juan as Pedro, the FBI used an exceedingly elaborate, supposedly foolproof technique to identify anyone speaking in Ojeda's apartment. At day's end, the tapes took a Federal Express trip to San Juan FBI headquarters, where they were precisely labeled and cataloged; summary sheets quickly found their way to Case Agent Rodriguez's desk. If the conversations created any confusion about the identity of a particular speaker, the tapes entered a contest. Four FBI voice experts listened to the tape, and assuming they had a sure basis for comparison (for example, a tape in which Juan says he was also

*Recall the FBI's full investigation of Los Macheteros and other independentistas.

Pedro), agents were able to tell Rodriguez who was who. At first it was hard to make particular IDs, but as the audio hours mounted up (by case's end Rodriguez said he had a thousand hours of tape), it was much easier to clear up any confusion. An agent simply turned to the positive ID on tape 42 and compared it to the voice on tape 101 or 127.

Day to day, the surveillance work could be boring. And even a bit embarrassing—the fellow in the fixed location, an apartment roughly thirty to fifty yards from Ojeda's residence, couldn't go to the toilet without permission. If he drank a lot of coffee on his eight-hour shift, the agent frequently called his moving colleagues, who, if he was lucky, were able to take over for a few minutes. If not, the agent had a problem, because Rodriguez didn't want to miss even one minute of surveillance.

Island agents were hungry. They'd been on this case for years, they finally had the group wired for sound, and they had unlimited expense accounts. This time the Feds would get Los Macheteros, and get 'em good.

Victor's involvement with the Macheteros made an early appearance on the FBI's Puerto Rican-based Machetero watch. Using the covert means legitimately at their disposal, agents discovered that group members planned a trip to New York. Excited by the prospect of uncovering mainland Macheteros, bureau personnel blanketed all suspected nationalists. As one Machetero boarded a plane from San Juan on March 22, 1984, the FBI had two agents roaming the airport "to place her on the plane," another agent sat near the suspect on the flight to New York, and once the plane landed, other agents watched as three island-based members of Los Macheteros took their comrade to a brown Datsun (New York license plate 2947B), which was promptly driven to a campground outside New Paltz, New York.

By the time the four suspected Macheteros got to New Paltz (it's about a three-hour drive from Manhattan), it was late evening. The FBI watched the Macheteros enter a white, oversize, 1973 Superior Motor Home. None had ever seen this vehicle before, and most would wait months to see it again, because the agents watching the motor home and the Datsun actually left the area from 2 A.M. to 5:30 A.M.! When they returned, the Macheteros had left for parts unknown. Agents did get the motor home's Texas license plate number, but with J. Edgar Hoover turning over in his grave, they had to tell superiors they had lost the motor home.

Higher-ups were understandably unhappy when they heard the New Paltz news; the loss of the motor home was an uncorrectable blunder. To put out an all-points bulletin on the motor home and the Datsun was to let every blabbermouth cop in the United States know the FBI had these people under surveillance. And if they were arrested, the rest of the group would burrow so far underground the FBI would have to cease the audio investigations it had only just begun. If the New Paltz agents had kept the motor home and its contents under close surveillance, the bureau could have tailed the suspected Macheteros to their ultimate destination. Instead of four lone Macheteros, agents might have uncovered a nationwide network, its international links, and the loot as well. But, as of 5:30 A.M. on March 23, 1984, that was a pipe dream. Agents settled for a complete examination of the campsite, plus a thorough title search of the Texas-based motor home.

Texas plate 767OQN was registered to a man named Juvenal Concepcion, who also had a driver's license that displayed a color photo of Filiberto Ojeda Rios. For the FBI, Concepcion was a new alias, which it turned out that Ojeda had used not only in Texas, but also in Southborough, Massachusetts. The title search showed that Ojeda (posing as Concepcion) had negotiated a deal for the motor home on September 11, 1983. There could be no doubt that it was Ojeda because the camper salespeople had met several times with this businesslike Puerto Rican gentleman, and were able to pick his picture out of a photo lineup. He agreed to buy the motor home a day before the Wells Fargo robbery, but he did not pay for it (with a cashier's check issued in the name of K. Fishman) until September 16.

Victor had escaped in the motor home! For a day or two that was only theory, but once agents discovered that it had entered Mexico on September 27, 1983 (since it traveled more than twenty miles from the border, the motor home and its occupants needed a permit from the Mexican authorities), they thought they knew why Victor wrote about the Big Sleep Heist. He had been in the Boston area right after the robbery occurred, he'd remained there for roughly a week, and when the going got good, he and his companions had driven, first to Mexico, and then to parts unknown. Agents had traced the cashier's check used to purchase the motor home to the Baybank Harvard Trust in Cambridge. And, using the photo equipment that keeps a record of every banking transaction, agents excitedly watched as Juan En-

rique Segarra bought the cashier's check in the name of K. Fishman. Now the bureau had Segarra and Ojeda Rios linked to the robbery. However, without the motor home, without the money, and without Victor, the FBI decided to continue its Puerto Rico–based surveillance. Agents thought they needed more evidence in order to make any indictments that would result in a meaningful series of convictions. And, as the FBI precisely followed the scientific rules of police procedure, Puerto Rican cops stumbled on a Machetero safe house.

Clandestine groups use the phrase "safe house" to refer to any police-free location. Los Macheteros had rented a small office on the third floor of a nondescript building. They'd been using the office successfully until a thief tried to rob another third-floor suite. The theft, in early April 1984, triggered a call to local police who, in Agent Rodriguez's words, "went in to conduct a cursory search for the burglar or burglars" and "stumbled" on an office "with an explosive device in plain view." Police also found a stash of weapons, and once a call to the FBI had produced the needed search warrant, authorities discovered a multitude of original Machetero documents: bylaws of the organization, more than 150 code names of Machetero members, original communiqués taking credit for group actions, an organizational chart detailing the group's political and military divisions, postattack criticisms of Machetero actions, and payroll sheets with full- and part-time workers precisely listed. It was a bonanza for the FBI and a disaster for the group.

As laboratory agents methodically sorted through their incredible find, field agents continued to monitor Ojeda Rios and his companions. On May 7, 1984, agents watched as El Viejo (one of Ojeda's code names, meaning "the old one") bought tickets for a flight to New York. He used the name Julio Lopez, and like the Macheteros two months earlier, he had bureau company on his trip. Agents tailed him to the airport, one sat near him on the plane, and, when he boarded a bus in New York, agents obediently let Greyhound do the driving all the way to Springfield, Massachusetts.

Springfield, roughly twenty minutes north of Hartford, also has a politically active Puerto Rican community. On May 10, 1984, at its generally dirty bus depot, Ojeda Rios was met by two other members of Los Macheteros, who, to the FBI's delight, used the same motor home agents had seen in New Paltz two months before to drive Ojeda from Springfield to a campground in Bellingham, Massachusetts.

This time they didn't lose the motor home. Indeed, agents were so intent on finding any shred of evidence that, once Ojeda and company left the grounds on May 11, bureau personnel combed through the Macheteros garbage and found a piece of worthwhile evidence. It didn't look like much to the untrained eye—a receipt with the words "Park and Fly" and a stamped number—but agents later discovered that the receipt had been issued at the Houston International Airport.

Meanwhile, Ojeda and his companions drove the motor home to Boston. Apparently unsure of how to dispose of what the FBI deemed was Victor's getaway car, the Macheteros held a conference in the parking lot of the Bradley Shopping Plaza in Dorchester, Massachusetts, which has yet another politically active Puerto Rican community. Parking lots are a perfect place to parley without fear of appearing conspicuous—unless, of course, you're being followed by a swarm of federal agents. As group members discussed the appropriate course of action, the FBI snapped a few pictures and secreted them away for later use in court. When the Macheteros left the motor home in a Boston storage lot, agents took more pictures—and the vehicle as well.

Slowly—too slowly for some agents—solid evidence was starting to accumulate. The FBI would eventually get their man, but what about the bureau's most-wanted man—Victor Gerena—and, equally important, the missing $7 million? Concerning Victor, the Feds were still taking shots in the dark, but they correctly guessed that part of the loot traveled to Mexico in September. When agents discovered that the motor home, lost in New Paltz, reentered Mexico on March 27, 1984, they understandably assumed that another portion or perhaps all of the remaining money went south after a nearly seven-month cooling period.

These guesses and assumptions became certainties when, after Ojeda's return to Puerto Rico on May 12, agents listened as he complained to colleagues about his superiors' handling of the money. The haul (or at least a good part of it) had gone to Mexico; from there the money had traveled to Cuba. Ojeda was upset because "if the Cubans have it, it's the organization [i.e., the Macheteros] that decides that, it's not me . . . it's going to cost

them dearly to learn their lessons about bad dealings . . . it's going to cost them that, to learn the hard way."*

Ojeda spoke volumes in these few sentences, one of which the FBI blew out of proportion. No matter what patriotic passions Ojeda openly displayed, the FBI refused to concede that he was a Puerto Rican nationalist first and a socialist second. That he had accepted or asked for help from Cuba could come as no surprise to agents who followed revolutionary politics—after all, if you were a Spanish-speaking revolutionary in the Caribbean, whom would you ask for assistance?—but the FBI did itself and the general public a disservice when it later underlined the Cuban connection, while relegating to footnote status Ojeda's long history of nationalist passion. As his entire adult life showed, Ojeda was not and never had been a tool of any revolution except the one that would finally free his beloved Puerto Rico. Ojeda was not a Cuban agent, not a Russian agent, and not commander in chief of Los Macheteros. As the Cuban comments revealed, Ojeda didn't want the cash in the hands of certain Macheteros. Only an anonymous they ("the organization") was to decide what would happen to the Wells Fargo money.

Granted, "they" would pay for refusing to heed Ojeda's warnings, but apart from losing the loot, the FBI had another form of payment in mind. In order to put people in jail and throw away the key, FBI agents had to know who the Machetero higher-ups were. Ojeda didn't mention his superiors' identities on tape, and although the safe-house haul had yielded a Macheteros membership list of 161 names, everything was in code—a roster of pseudonyms in search of reality.

In May 1984, field agents in Puerto Rico received orders to stay on the trail of Los Macheteros. Five months of surveillance and bugging had unearthed a great deal of new evidence, and nobody knew what tomorrow's bug would bring. Perhaps Ojeda or Segarra would one day mention the Puerto Ricans who really controlled the group, the money, and soldiers like Victor Gerena?

In the meantime, agents received permission to tell their mainland colleagues about their Cuban discovery. This proved helpful because, in West Hartford, Tony Duffy and Jim Millan had just told local reporters that Victor could be in Canada. They

*Ojeda was not referring to the country of Cuba in these remarks. Part of the money, as the FBI knew, was in Cuba, but Los Cubanos ("the Cubans") was the name of the Machetero cell handling the money and may or may not have been based in Cuba.

had come to this conclusion when, more mystified than ever, they had reinterviewed Victor's close friends and relatives. As usual, nobody had anything worthwhile to say until, on May 17, 1984, Victor's ex-lover mentioned a trip to Canada that had never been mentioned. Yes, Victor had gone with friends, and he'd even bought Maggie a lovely scarf decorated with pictures of Quebec. Did Maggie have the scarf? And, if she did, could Duffy borrow it for a while?

When Maggie obligingly produced Victor's gift, Duffy went to work. This was the first clue he'd seen in months, and he meant to make the most of it. The next day he had a stack of color photos of the scarf on his desk. As he passed them around to interested parties, he called on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. In Quebec and Montreal, in Ottawa and Toronto, helpful Mounties plastered Victor's picture in prominent locations. They featured his profile—an ugly photo from Wells Fargo—in the June issue of the *Royal Mounted Police Gazette,* and like Duffy and Millan, the Mounties completely wasted their time.

Island-based agents finally told Duffy and company in mid-July 1984 that Victor was in Cuba. As Duffy said later, "I mean, I wouldn't have made all those calls to Canada if I'd known. I don't recall the exact date, but Jim must have told me sometime in July. And I'm certain he briefed me right after he was told."

Millan won't say if Duffy's right, but whatever the exact date island agents began to share information with their mainland colleagues, it marked a watershed in the history of the Wells Fargo investigation. Fourteen months before anyone was arrested, Hartford authorities had known "who done it," but they couldn't do "a damn thing" with the information they possessed. Since island agents now controlled the case as well as the flow of information, all Tony Duffy and Jim Millan could do was wait for somebody else to collar their man. And all the while, they had to pretend they didn't have the information they had.

Duffy found this especially hard. It was bad enough being demoted to the second team, but Duffy hated lying to the press and to his own detectives. People would ask, "What's new with Victor?" and Duffy would say, "Nothing," because the FBI had released the information on a strictly need-to-know basis. Only three people in West Hartford* legitimately knew what was happening, and they kept quiet since any public hint of the FBI's

*The three people were Duffy, his boss, Captain Russell Hughes, and Chief Frank Reynolds.

discoveries would, first, blow the case out of the water, second, ruin the reputation of the West Hartford police department, and, third, destroy the career of the flap-jawed cop.

As partial compensation for his silence, Duffy heard an incredible story: Audio surveillance revealed that on the first anniversary of the robbery, September 12, 1984, Los Macheteros would take public credit for the Wells Fargo "expropriation." From his hideaway in Cuba, Victor would write a number of postcards to members of the media, promising an important public announcement; if newspaper and television executives would agree to provide free publicity, Victor would appear in a videotape. He would disclose his affiliation with Los Macheteros, applaud the group's efforts, and tell Americans why he and his people desired independence.

Despite the incredible sense of anticipation the promised cards produced, Duffy was told that the audio tape promised no quick end to the case. The FBI had no intention of stopping the planned announcements or arresting any Macheteros once the videotape was aired. Since higher-ups had decided to build a rock-hard case around the robbery, they willingly let Los Macheteros do as they pleased. As long as no one got hurt, agents were eager to watch Ojeda and Segarra provide, with their publicity stunts, irrefutable evidence of complicity in the Wells Fargo robbery. The material taken in the safe-house haul was promising, but if allowing more time would implicate more people in the West Hartford case, Los Macheteros could have as much as the FBI needed.

The FBI's plan depended on nobody finding out about the bugs. A leak could utterly ruin the bureau's case and a leak is what Lon Lacey thought he had in early August 1984.

This is what happened. While doing background research in August 1984 on Puerto Rico, I stumbled on a document entitled "The Cuban Connection in Puerto Rican Terrorism," an account of hearings held in 1982 by the Senate subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws. It contained a litany of generally unsubstantiated charges against Fidel Castro; an overview of independence groups such as Los Macheteros; and a photograph and biography of Filiberto Ojeda Rios. The FBI had said that Ojeda was a Cuban agent and that he coordinated the activities of five

independence groups. Despite an ongoing investigation, the FBI claimed not to know where Ojeda based his operations.

Since the hearings provided a possible explanation of Victor's activities, I asked Duffy if he'd ever heard of groups like Los Macheteros or the Organization of Volunteers for the Puerto Rican Revolution. To his credit, Duffy played dumb. No, he'd never heard of groups like that, but he would like to take a look at the documents.

Once Duffy saw the record of the hearings, he turned them over to the FBI. He knew they would think he had talked, but he put the case ahead of his career. Duffy doubted that the agents he was working with knew that this account of the hearings existed. In preparing Millan and Lacey to be ready for my questions, he opened what soon turned into a can of worms.

Millan gave the hearings to his boss, Dick Farley, who gave them to his boss, Lon Lacey, who ordered an immediate freeze on further discussions with the West Hartford police. "How the hell did Fernandez get that information?" Nobody wanted to credit serendipity and a working knowledge of government documents; the FBI apparently thought I knew what I didn't then know. When I saw the tension in Duffy's face—he feared for his career because the bureau refused to believe he'd said nothing—I knew I must have struck paydirt. Nobody exercised that kind of pressure unless they were hiding something. My problem was to figure out what. Because I still didn't know what they thought I knew.

In an interview with Frank Reynolds, he believed me when I told him Duffy had said nothing. Nevertheless, the uproar raised by the FBI had convinced Reynolds that I knew what I didn't, and in the course of our conversation, he unintentionally confirmed, first, that Los Macheteros were behind the Wells Fargo robbery and, second, that I had to keep quiet about the postcards.

What postcards? As Reynolds stressed the importance of my silence, he made me privy to information that put me in a much better position to deal with my next command performance, a date with the FBI at its New Haven headquarters for a discussion of my investigative activities.

Terry Schumard, who handled the press for the FBI, ushered me into the office of Lon Lacey, a tall, handsome, intelligent lawyer who initially let Schumard try to "grease" me. Authors

were the "cream of the crop." They were much brighter than reporters, had higher morals, and when they cooperated with the bureau, were often given permission to analyze even the most sensitive FBI documents. All I had to do was to wait until the bureau made the arrests and I'd be given open access to bureau files, plus a personal meeting with Judge William Webster.

After we all agreed that Schumard was laying it on much too thick, Lacey got down to business. "How did I find out about the hearings?" I explained that it was just the lucky find of a college professor doing research on the Wells Fargo robbery. I think Lacey believed me, and he patiently stressed the need for my silence. The bureau had invested a lot of time in this case, and any hint that agents were tapped into the Machetero network would force a hand the FBI did not want to play. I had to keep quiet.

As I drove home, I realized that Lacey had neatly boxed me into a corner. If I went public, who'd believe me? The account of the hearings said nothing about Victor or the robbery or the postcards. I'd gotten that from the police, who, when reporters called to confirm my allegations, would deny everything I said. Without the FBI's "Yes, it's true," nothing would appear in print or on television.

Even more important, Lacey had boxed me in with Los Macheteros. Given my last name, he may have thought I was sympathetic to the nationalists; instead of mentioning the wiretaps, he led me to believe that the FBI had an informant or informants in Los Macheteros. This made sense because Judge Webster had recently confirmed the FBI's increasing reliance on informants; the ongoing prosecution of FALN members in Chicago was based on the testimony of an informant, and given their foreknowledge of the postcards, it seemed reasonable to assume that well-placed informants were keeping the FBI abreast of the group's plans. If I should be tempted to tell members of Los Macheteros what I knew, I could never know if the person I was talking to was a genuine member of the group or the FBI's squealer. If I guessed wrong, I'd be in jail, and the group would still be subject to the FBI's surveillance.

Lacey had deftly plugged the leak: I had a scoop I could share with no one. My only viable alternative was to wait out the month and see if, as the supposed informant had said, Victor would publicly announce why he had taken part in the Wells Fargo expropriation.

While I anxiously waited for Victor's video appearance, I began to read the books and attend the meetings that, over time, helped me to better understand Los Macheteros and the cause they violently championed.

It took nearly a year for me to realize that the robbery represented only one act in a ninety-year-long play, and that to understand the script and the actors, I had to know something, first, about Puerto Rico's past, and, second, about the people who loudly demanded Puerto Rico's independence. I began with only a little knowledge about Puerto Rican history and even less about revolutionaries. I learned about the past in a library and about the revolutionary future when nationalists allowed me to attend the meetings where they saluted, not the Stars and Stripes, but the lone star that would someday fly over the island of Boriquén.

5

Puerto Rican Time

A POLITICAL MEETING scheduled for 7:00 begins at 7:30 or 8:00 because nobody rushes. My friend Juan says it's Puerto Rican time. The many people who travel by bus can only hope to arrive on schedule, and when they do, political discussion waits as people chat about their lives, reminisce about their last trip home to Puerto Rico, or chase after toddlers. The atmosphere is convivial and informal. At some point, the person in charge moves to the front of the audience and starts talking, as quickly people quiet down. Nobody tells *los compañeros* (literally, the companions) what to do; you ask, and people normally listen because, except for possible police informants, everyone in the room is a Puerto Rican nationalist.

For me, Puerto Rican time is difficult. I always arrive not only on schedule but ahead of schedule. Ten minutes before a meeting, I'm in my seat and, at most nationalist gatherings, all alone. I'm impatient and anxious to get moving, but my complaints to friends are quickly passed off as the babblings of a cultural stranger. Except for one night. I was moaning about the slow pace when a friend angrily said, "You have been doing this book for a year. Puerto Ricans have waited nearly ninety years for independence. Learn to be patient." Learn about Puerto Rican time.

In Hartford, the nationalists have no headquarters; they use whatever facilities are available, so one night a meeting is at the YWCA and another evening it's at a local Baptist church. Nationalists take whatever hall is available. One especially unique gathering was held at the Happy Days Child Care Center.* Set in a lovely park, surrounded by a boxy old factory, an exquisite Gothic church, and a discount rug dealership, the child care center is a plain concrete rectangle with bars on its windows and graffiti on its walls. In addition to the usual announcements of young love, a gang called the Mod Men had thoroughly defaced the building.

*No such place exists. I agreed to keep the location of this meeting a secret, but the description is accurate.

The Happy Days facility welcomes any child in Hartford, but given its inner-city location, Puerto Ricans and blacks dominate the facility's everyday activities. At night the center opens its doors to community events, and this evening the sponsoring group was the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political Prisoners of War. Across the United States, more than twenty-five young Puerto Rican men and women have been convicted on charges ranging from bombings to contempt of the grand jury; in each instance the motivation was proudly political, but authorities still treated the accused as though they were members of an organized crime syndicate. Since in the eyes of Puerto Rican nationalists, this was both an insult and a miscarriage of justice, they formed a committee to publicize the plight of their people. With active organizations in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Dorchester (Massachusetts), and Hartford, the Committee sponsors public events and pickets prisons that mistreat prisoners. Each month a magazine called *Libertad* is hand-delivered to anyone who cares. On the cover of each *Libertad* is a drawing in black of a hand behind bars, superimposed over the red, white, and blue Puerto Rican flag. Above and below the flag, there is always the same message: "Freedom fighters—not terrorists."

That night's speaker was Mrs. Josefina Rodriguez. She had two daughters in prison—one sentenced for thirty years, the other for 107 years. At the Committee's request, she was crisscrossing the United States in an effort to gain additional support for Puerto Rican activists. That evening I waited longer than usual, because the bus carrying Mrs. Rodriguez got caught in Friday-night traffic. Mrs. Rodriguez saw the United States through the windows of a Greyhound bus, but if that tired her out, it didn't show on her face when she crossed a threshold full of Mod Men graffiti.

Mrs. Rodriguez was perhaps five feet tall and about fifty years old. She wore a lovely flowered dress, her salt-and-pepper hair was perfectly styled, her makeup highlighted a pretty face free of wrinkles, her smile was quick and relaxed, and her eyes showed the determination one needs to ride a bus from city to city. Mrs. Rodriguez's appearance would have made the Moral Majority cheer, and what's more, her looks and demeanor were typical, not unique. The media-inspired image of the revolutionary is a bomb-throwing fanatic. The reality is a group of people who value not only revolution, but cleanliness, industriousness,

ambition, perseverance, hard work, and the family. No American hates the food-stamp program more than a serious Puerto Rican nationalist.

About twenty people had shown up for the meeting. Once Mrs. Rodriguez took her place at the head table, a three-by-five-foot Puerto Rican flag was tacked to a wall flanking the audience. That customary act completed, a local activist introduced Mrs. Rodriguez, and for the next hour she quietly but passionately explained the treatment her daughters had received.

Caught with explosives allegedly linked to bombings by the FALN, Lucy and Alica each had awaited trial in an isolation cell. Throughout the preconviction period, officials kept contact with family members to a bare minimum, and handcuffs linked the women's wrists at all times. To use the bathroom, her daughters had to place their wrists through an opening in the bars and signal a guard, who removed the cuffs and stood outside the cell while the women used the toilet. As soon as they finished, the cuffs were once again snapped shut. In Mrs. Rodriguez's eyes, this behavior violated the most elementary rules governing the treatment of prisoners of war. The universal standard, the Geneva convention of 1864, clearly prohibits "cruel treatment" and specifically mandates that "prisoners be allowed to receive individual or collective relief." The Rodriguez women lived in complete isolation, herded about with no respect for their status as human beings. It was especially galling to Mrs. Rodriguez that every time her daughters were moved from their cells, officials added another pair of cuffs to their ankles.

After the women received their sentences, the mental and physical punishment continued. Protests from the Committee forced government officials to move the women out of isolation cells, but nothing had been done about the locations of their prisons. As Mrs. Rodriguez saw it, the penal system had unjustly placed her daughters in facilities far from home because authorities wanted to be absolutely sure relatives and friends received few opportunities to visit. During Lucy's uncle's visit, he wanted to get something from his car and was assured he would be allowed to return; when he tried to do so, he was forbidden to reenter the prison. Why such "vindictive pettiness"? And why not let the women see all the mail they received? And perhaps the most upsetting issue of all, why not confine them in Puerto Rico? They were not women without a country.

When Mrs. Rodriguez finished her statement, the floor was opened to questions from the audience. One or two people responded with obvious requests—how could they offer more help to imprisoned nationalists?—but one fellow asked a very peculiar question: Why were her daughters prisoners of war? Any nationalist knew the answer to that one, and I had assumed that anyone listening to Mrs. Rodriguez was, if not openly a nationalist, at least a strong sympathizer. The question seemed decidedly out of place. Perhaps the fellow was a police plant?

If Mrs. Rodriguez had that thought, it didn't seem to phase her as she patiently explained the Committee's position. The United States had invaded Puerto Rico. Soldiers had taken the country by force, negotiators had called the island a reparation for lost American lives, and when Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States, the islanders had not been consulted.

Yet the military proclamation issued by General Nelson Miles in 1898 proudly announced that the United States had come "to grant Puerto Ricans the rights and benefits offered by the liberal institutions of our system of government."

Puerto Ricans had expected freedom and independence. Instead they were forced to accept an appointed governor and the status of a possession. Since 1898, Puerto Rico and the United States had been at war. No nationalist recognized American authority as legitimate, none participated in elections that were, by definition, an imperialist ploy, and, if people like Mrs. Rodriguez's daughters joined clandestine groups, it was the oppressors who labeled their acts terrorism. By definition, war equaled violence, but to a nationalist underground, soldiers were "freedom fighters—not terrorists."

As she explained her daughters' prisoner-of-war status, Mrs. Rodriguez avoided anger and contempt. After nearly ninety years of American occupation by the United States, Josefina Rodriguez expected exactly what her daughters received. She was resigned to the behavior of the United States—what else would imperialists do?—but not to the American presence. She accepted petty vindictiveness as an integral part of *la lucha* (the struggle), but she never showed any of the docility that is supposedly part of the Puerto Rican national character. Proudly noting, with a sly smile, "that nothing bothers the empire more than two independentistas shaking hands," Mrs. Rodriguez ended her talk with a plea "to place our faith in the underground

groups" who will ultimately liberate, not only the prisoners of war, but our beloved Puerto Rico as well.

I got up, thinking the formal part of the evening over, when a local activist asked everyone to stand in place: We would now sing the national anthem. I was thoroughly unprepared for what followed. Raising their left arms, with fists clenched, everyone in the room slowly sang a shorter version of this poem:

Awake, Boriquénos,
for they've given the signal:

Awake from your sleep
for it's time to fight:

Come: The sound of cannon
will be dear to us.

At that patriotic clamor
doesn't your heart burn?

Look: The Cuban will soon be free,
the machete will give him freedom.

The drum of war announces in its beating
that the thicket is the place, the meeting place.

Most beautiful Boriquén, we have to follow Cuba;
you have brave sons who want to fight.

Let us no more seem fearful.
Let us no more, timid, permit our enslavement.

We want to be free already
and our machete is well-sharpened.

Why should we, then, remain so asleep
and deaf, asleep and deaf to that signal?

There's no need to fear, Ricans, the sound of the cannon,
for saving the homeland is the duty of the heart.

We want no more despots. Let the tyrant fall.
Women, likewise wild, will know how to fight.

We want freedom and our machete will give it to us.

Let's go Puerto Ricans, let's go already,
for liberty is waiting, ever so anxious.*

*Translated from the Spanish by Barry J. Luby.

The lyrics are almost a century old. No matter how significant the words, I learned far more from the mood and demeanor of the singers. This was not, as in a mandatory opening to a sports event, an apathetic rendering of a national anthem. For nationalists, "La Boriquéna" symbolizes a passionate desire for social change and a reminder of what had been lost but would be regained. One young man, born in New York, sang the entire anthem with his eyes closed. As if to emphasize his commitment, he stopped singing at certain points and although I didn't look at his fist, I imagine he clenched it more tightly with each pause.

Another fellow I knew well smiled throughout the song. Rene* seems happiest when thinking about an independent Puerto Rico; perhaps self and nation merge when he sings "La Boriquéna." He once told me that if Puerto Rico became an independent nation, he would be on the first plane home. His wife and kids could follow him once his wife had sold their house and belongings, but he would not stay another day in the United States once his country was free.

At the time his remarks seemed exaggerated. But as I watched him sing with such a proud smile, I knew he was serious. This man lived on alien soil. His only real home was a Caribbean island forty miles wide and one hundred miles long, and if his smile meant love, his fist meant force. Rene, along with every other nationalist in the room, was a homegrown revolutionary with a ninety-year-old thirst for independence. They meant to live in a free Puerto Rico and, if they didn't succeed in their lifetimes, the children scampering about the room would pick up the flag and continue, into infinity, la lucha.

As one woman put it at another meeting, her one hope was that each of her three children would imitate the actions of Victor Gerena. "Viva Puerto Rico Libre," said the audience as they applauded a revolutionary fervor as sincere as any expressed by Thomas Paine or Thomas Jefferson.

Driving home I wondered about the meaning of patriotism in relation to the question of United States citizenship. After all, whether they were for or against independence, it seemed undeniable that the people I had seen genuinely loved their country; they were ardent Puerto Rican patriots. Yet every man, woman, and child in the room was also a United States citizen.

*This is a pseudonym.

How had that happened? Were Puerto Ricans unpatriotic if they were too devoted to the land of their birth? My Spanish grandfather came to the United States in 1916 but returned home within a year. He couldn't live without Spain, and nobody called him a traitor. People understood him and the many other immigrants who returned home.

For Puerto Ricans, home is a territorial possession of the United States. Quite unlike my grandfather, a Puerto Rican who desires to return to an independent homeland is not only unpatriotic, he or she is seditious.

In 1987 Puerto Ricans are free only to be Americans. But, as my newly undertaken education soon showed, since at least 1914 they have only wanted to be Puerto Ricans.

RELUCTANT CITIZENS

On April 15, 1914, Senate Chaplain the Reverend Forrest J. Prettyman opened the day session of the United States Senate with an empassioned plea to the Almighty: "God . . . we find ourselves in the midst of a sphere of influence and responsibility calling upon all the forces of our nature to meet divinely imposed obligations . . . We pray that Thou will bless all authority in this nation. Give them wisdom in council; give to them the spirit of brotherhood . . . May this nation, as it has in the past, stand for the great principles of freedom of thought and conscience . . . For Christ's sake. Amen."[1]

With this laudable prayer formally on the record, senators turned to the business at hand: the peculiar political status of the Puerto Rican people. Were they citizens of the United States? Citizens of the nonstate Puerto Rico? Citizens of an unincorporated territory that would become a state, a nation, or . . . nobody knew what! For years Congress had debated the fate of Puerto Rico's inhabitants, only to conclude that the peace-loving residents of this conquered territory were left practically without a country. The United States owned the island—everybody, including the Supreme Court, agreed on that—but a nation that openly boasted of its empire refused to have subjects. Congress had simply left the Puerto Ricans on hold for more than fifteen years, and now, when Congress finally seemed ready to give Puerto Ricans what Americans wanted, the island's House of Delegates sent the mainland's Senate a "cease and desist" order.

Read into the *Congressional Record* right after the Reverend Prettyman's prayer was a statement by which the Puerto Rican House of Delegates:

> . . . with the profoundest respect, begged to address to the President and to the Congress of the United States, the present clearly reasoned statement, the fruit of a careful and impartial analysis of the [citizenship] question, as also of an exact knowledge of the sentiments and wishes of the vast majority of Puerto Ricans. . . .
>
> While nothing that may be said should be construed as disparaging or mortifying with regard to the noble title of American citizenship; but that, while rendering just and sincere homage to your citizenship, we firmly and loyally maintain our opposition to being declared, in defiance of our express wish or without our express consent, citizens of any country whatsoever other than our own beloved soil that God has given us as an inalienable gift and incoercible right. . . .
>
> It has been repeated through ignorance of the facts and a confusion of ideas, that although the granting of American citizenship solves no practical problems, it yet satisfies a spiritual need that responds to a general sentiment.
>
> When one speaks thus a distinction should be made as to whether that longing and that sentiment live in the hearts of Americans or in the hearts of Puerto Ricans. It seems that in matters of the heart, in dealing with something like citizenship that may alter the life and the destiny of our people, it is to us to whom the sentiment should be attributed and it should be we who manifest it. But if we are to speak with entire loyalty we must say . . . the sentiment of American citizenship for Puerto Rico* is neither in you nor in us. . . .
>
> You have known for many years that the people of our island is profoundly displeased, that it is in constant protest against the absurd form of government that you imposed on us without our consent; . . . you have probably interpreted our displeasure and our protest as due to the fact that you have not granted us American citizenship, when, in reality, of the few good things contained in our present Organic Act [instituted in 1900], the best is Puerto Rican citizenship. . . .
>
> While you can surely, by a law of your Congress, decree that all Puerto Ricans are Americans, you cannot change the culture. We are Puerto Ricans, Spanish-Americans, of Latin soul, imaginative, high-strung . . . separated from you by over 400 years and by more than 400

*When the United States took the island, officials invented a new spelling for the Spanish word *Puerto*. Until 1932 all congressional documents said *Porto*, even though no such word existed. This was a constant slap in the face to islanders. In the quotes taken from this period, I have spelled the word correctly.

leagues, with a different historic process, diverse language, different customs. . . .

So great is our love for our own citizenship, our own fatherland, that, in conclusion, we must make use of hyperbole to express the earnestness of our sentiment. We, like all Puerto Ricans, are believers in the existence of God . . . but were there a citizenship of heaven, with a right to eternal happiness and it were offered to us in exchange for our own, we would vacillate to accept it and should under no circumstances accept it until after death.[2]

Dated March 27, 1914, this petition had been *unanimously* approved by the Puerto Rican House of Delegates. It was a frank admission of their deepest sentiments, and, for Americans, an excellent and rare insight into the political opinions of the Puerto Rican people. Since the island's governor and executive council were appointed by Washington, only the House of Delegates represented the will of Puerto Rican voters. No one could know with certainty whether the vast majority of islanders echoed the sentiments expressed in the petition, but it was certain that only the House of Delegates had the right to claim a mandate from the Puerto Rican people.

The Senate didn't seem to care. Once the statement was read into the record, legislators turned to other business—such as a petition from the Sunday School of the Sabbath church of Nashua, New Hampshire, to prohibit the manufacture, sale, and importation of intoxicating beverages—and in the absence of a lead from President Woodrow Wilson, senators once again placed the fate of the Puerto Rican people on hold. The Senate now knew what Puerto Ricans wanted but a reading of the yearly debates shows that islanders would get what the United States gave them when the President and Congress decided the correct course for Puerto Rico's owner.

Meanwhile, many members of the island's dominant Unionist Party openly advocated independence, and in Washington, Puerto Rico's resident commissioner,* Luis Muñoz Rivera, continually tried to explain the attitudes and beliefs of the Puerto Rican people. Muñoz was a moderate all his political life; when battling the Spanish before 1898 and the Americans afterward, he had always favored autonomy under a major power's political

*Though denied any voting rights in Congress, the resident commissioner from Puerto Rico tries to represent the island's interests in Washington.

and military umbrella. Muñoz perceived in many congressmen a "who cares?" attitude when it came to Puerto Rico, yet many congressmen called him a model democrat. He relied on facts when he made a political case, he never advocated violence, and he consistently compromised his political dreams. Luis Muñoz Rivera usually played by the book, one that Congress had written. But as he rose to speak on May 5, 1916, Muñoz finally lost his patience. He was angry but hopeful that Congress might listen if a respected moderate forcefully expressed the true sentiments of the Puerto Rican people regarding citizenship.

If, Muñoz began, when American unfurled the Stars and Stripes over the fortresses of San Juan in 1898, someone had suggested to Puerto Ricans that "the land of liberty" would deny them self-government, "my countrymen would have refused to believe such a prophecy, considering it sheer madness." Under the supposedly tyrannical Spanish, Puerto Rico had had an autonomous government, headed by a governor whose "power, strictly limited by law, made him the equivalent of those constitutional sovereigns who reign but do not govern." The members of the cabinet, without whose signature no executive order was valid, were natives of the island, as were the representatives in the Senate and the House; the administration in its entirety was in the hands of Puerto Ricans. "The Spanish Cortes, it is true, retained the power to make statutory laws for Puerto Rico, but in the Cortes' sixteen Puerto Rican representatives and three Puerto Rican senators had voice and vote. And all the island laws were made by the insular Parliament."

Under the United States, Puerto Ricans had expected better. They had expected freedom but had received instead a system far worse than that obtained from the Spanish. For example, the American-appointed governor had real power, it was not required that his unelected executive council contain a majority of natives, and most humiliating of all, Puerto Ricans had no voting rights in the United States Congress. It was true that islanders payed no federal taxes, but origin of that exemption underlined the cruel nature of American rule. Congressmen feared a contradiction: How could a country whose founders resisted taxation without representation take tax money from a people who had no power to shape their political destiny?

Why didn't Puerto Ricans have that power? Muñoz Rivera knew the excuses offered, but they all lacked legitimacy. Was

illiteracy the reason? Muñoz reminded us that ". . . if in Puerto Rico sixty percent of the electorate cannot read, in the United States in the early days of the Republic, eighty percent of the population were unable to read; and even today there are twenty republics which acknowledge a higher percentage of illiteracy than Puerto Rico."

Were there too many black people in Puerto Rico? Muñoz Rivera pointed out that "ten states show a higher percentage of Negro population than Puerto Rico." Was physical size or the number of people the issue? These too had to be ruled out, because two states were smaller than Puerto Rico and eighteen had fewer people.

Muñoz Rivera pulled no punches when he cited three factors that constituted the real reason Puerto Rico was denied self-government: war, conquest, and greed. The United States had invaded the island and once its soldiers controlled the populace, greedy office seekers—"hungry for power and authority"—justified their exploitation by proclaiming that the childlike islanders needed an extended period of tutelage. To Muñoz Rivera, Puerto Ricans were "the southerners of the twentieth century." Soldiers maintained order while a group of Yankee carpetbaggers clothed their desire for booty under the flags of paternalism and self-righteousness.

Muñoz Rivera did not want to be an American, and neither did his constituents. They wanted what God had given them so much that "as long as Puerto Rico exists on the surface of the ocean, poor and small as she is, and even if she were poorer and smaller, Puerto Ricans will always choose Puerto Rican citizenship. And the Congress of the United States will have performed an indefensible act if it tries to destroy so legitimate a sentiment and to annul through a law of its own making a law of the oldest and wisest legislators of all time—a law of nature."[3]

When Muñoz Rivera sat down, the first reaction from congressmen was applause. The second was to dictate the course and nature of Puerto Rican government. Congressman Clarence Miller of Minnesota openly admitted that Muñoz Rivera "had not been on the floor of the House making a great many speeches because he did not have a chance. Congress did not see fit to give consideration to measures for Puerto Rico in which he and his people were interested." But, despite this congressional cold shoulder, Muñoz and his people wanted to be heard. Somehow

they didn't get the point. The United States owned the island and, according to Congressman Miller, "The bill that passes and becomes a law is going to put permanently to rest the unrest in Puerto Rico relative to the political status of the island. If this bill [an early version of the Jones Act of 1917] is enacted into law . . . it means that the Congress of the United States says to the people of Puerto Rico once and for all, that they are a part of the United States domain and will always remain there; that the agitation for independence in Puerto Rico must come to a decided and a permanent end. I do not suppose it is particularly congenial to those interested in political propaganda to put to one side such a splendid topic to talk upon as the independence of any place, but if there is anything that you and I must be agreed upon it is this: That Puerto Rico will never go out from under the shadow of the Stars and Stripes."[4]

Now the congressman got the applause, as he continued to explain the realities of American policy to Muñoz Rivera. "It is not every group of people that can have an independent and isolated sovereignty." For reasons of national honor and national security, the United States controlled and would forever control Puerto Rico. Nothing more needed to be said, but as long as Muñoz Rivera had brought it up, why weren't the Puerto Ricans grateful to their American benefactors? The sugar industry had had a "tremendous stimulus," 88 percent of Puerto Rican trade is with the United States ("We have been a wonderful purchaser of the things you have raised"), and "every boy and girl born on the island has a chance for education and industrial opportunity."[5] Why weren't islanders satisfied?

If he had been given sufficient time to respond—he was not—Muñoz Rivera might have answered, angrier than ever, in this manner. By American rules Puerto Rican teachers and their students could not speak Spanish in the classroom; in their own country, teachers were penalized for speaking their own language. Was Congressman Miller suggesting that sane men say thank you for this denial? How were teachers supposed to teach and children learn in a language they did not know?

And the names given to schools? Washington, Longfellow, Garfield, Prescott, Peabody, and Webster. What did these strange names mean to Puerto Ricans? Why excuse children from school to attend mandatory parades on Lincoln's or Washington's birthday when the most important date on the Puerto

Rican religious calendar—January 6, the Festival of the Three Kings—was not, despite protests, acknowledged by the American commissioners of education?

Were the Yankees trying to destroy island culture while they simultaneously bred ignorance? That's how it seemed to islanders who watched their children practice arithmetic by counting pictures of peaches. Did the Americans fail to realize that Puerto Rican youngsters had never seen a peach? Likewise, did they not realize that mandating the use of American textbooks in the classroom only guaranteed that, like the use of English, learning would become a foreign experience?[6]

Apparently not. A reading of these debates shows that whenever Muñoz Rivera complained, he received another lecture. As Congressman Miller told him when he tried again to protest the imposition of American citizenship, Puerto Ricans had to learn "that they will best be serving their own interests if they remain comfortably under the shadow of Uncle Sam's strong right arm [applause in Congress] . . . We are going to give them citizenship. Ten years from now they are going to rise up and call us blessed for doing so. But we are not going to give everyone the right to vote; and they are all going to rise up and bless us for doing that too."

Congressman Miller was serious. And so were his colleagues. Simeon Fess of Ohio had listened to Muñoz Rivera represent Puerto Rican public opinion, but he nevertheless stated that islanders "keenly wanted" to be American citizens. And William Green of Iowa was not only astonished that Puerto Ricans were "unable to appreciate the splendid bounty about to be theirs," he couldn't believe that "any thinking man in Puerto Rico would suppose that in this day and age that island could remain independent. . . . For their own good and for our own good we must maintain some kind of control over Puerto Rico."[7]

And the United States did. By signing the Jones Act, President Wilson formally made Puerto Ricans American citizens on March 2, 1917, but instead of feeling grateful, ten years later the Puerto Rican legislature was angrily asking President Calvin Coolidge for self-government. Thirty-three years later two Puerto Rican nationalists tried to assassinate President Harry S. Truman. And sixty-eight years later, on January 18, 1985, a new generation of independence seekers used bazookas to attack Yankee military establishments from San Juan to Ponce.

Reading the history, I realized that Victor's dream of independence was older than America's. Puerto Ricans had always tried to oust any interlopers. But the United States Congress had the nerve to challenge what Muñoz called "a law of nature." To Victor Gerena, the young and old people at nationalist gatherings, and the proud men and women who inhabit the island's mountainous interior, the issue of sedition or disloyalty is incomprehensible. Since Puerto Ricans had never asked to be Americans, nationalists fail to comprehend why they should recognize an authority their ancestors clearly rejected.

While I was learning that might does not make right for Puerto Rican nationalists, Victor decided to go public. The videotape never appeared, but four postcards announcing a new Machetero did. Victor Gerena was a revolutionary. That was the suggestion made by the postcards that many people refused to believe.

NOTES

1. *Congressional Record,* United States Senate, Volume 51, April 14, 1914, 6718.
2. Ibid., 6719–20. See also *Porto Rico Citizenship*, Senate Report Number 1300, 62nd Congress, Third Session, February 24, 1913.
3. *Congressional Record,* House of Representatives, Volume 53, May 5, 1916, 7470–3.
4. Ibid., 7473.
5. Ibid., 7474.
6. See, for example, Aida Negron de Montilla, *Americanization in Puerto Rico and the Public School System, 1900–1930* (Rio Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1970).
7. See *Congressional Record,* Volume 53, May 5, 1916, pages 7479–90.

6

A Machetero? Prove It!

RUMORS have a bad name. For some people they conjure up an image of busybodies whispering hurtful lies. For others, rumors suggest danger or even mayhem. Rumor inspires riots and panic when it furnishes the information that sends people into the streets. Like the loose lips that sink ships, rumors do damage because they move people to act before they think, or, even more dangerous, to act on their worst rather than their best instincts.

Although conventional wisdom assigns a negative connotation to rumors, many are harmless and many are more or less accurate. A sensible response to an absence of information, a rumor occurs when people want knowledge they are unable to obtain. As was the case with Victor and with Los Macheteros, government sources sometimes don't (or won't or can't) provide the facts, so people improvise. They make up explanations based on their need for knowledge, and those explanations can be quite plausible. Rumors are improvised news.

Take Victor and Wells Fargo. The robbery was fast approaching its first anniversary, yet no one who could talk publicly had any solid information about what had actually happened. Some people said the FBI knew something they weren't telling, but that didn't make any difference to a street guy hungry for the truth. A year later Victor was still a hot topic in the old neighborhood and in the office buildings that catch the real beat of Hartford. People wanted to know what had happened to a half-ton of cold cash. In the absence of facts from the police or media, the rumor mill worked overtime. People improvised and most of the fabrications made good sense.

The dominant rumor, the one I heard day after day, focused on the Mafia. Somehow, maybe because he had large debts, Victor had gotten involved with professional thieves. They used Victor's courage and brains to get their hands on the loot, but once the money left Wells Fargo, Victor became an expendable

commodity. The cops and the Feds kept drawing a blank because the Mafia had "wasted"—the word people used—Victor Gerena minutes after the robbery had occurred, efficiently disposing of his body in the Connecticut River.

Another rumor connected Victor with a mysterious woman. Advocates of the romance angle believed Jimmy McKeon when he told police that Victor had not driven the loot-laden car out of the depot. Someone else had done that, and that someone had to be very close to Victor or, after nearly two hours' work and substantial risk, he would never have stayed locked in the garage as the money disappeared into the night. Since Victor liked women and they liked him, the rumor had it that he had established a liaison nobody knew about. Together he and his woman partner—she was normally thought of as Anglo, occasionally as Puerto Rican—had planned the robbery. She took care of the getaway details and had done a hell of a job because, a year after the robbery, nobody knew anything about her, or Victor's, or the money's whereabouts.

If it weren't a woman, it had to be a member of the family. It was true that they all had alibis, but once again, who would Victor trust? Would he allow a casual acquaintance, another guy in need of cash, to drive out with his $7 million? If Victor didn't have a mystery girlfriend, it had to be a relative—maybe somebody from the island, a cousin he rarely saw—who faithfully waited outside while Victor took care of the robbery's final details. "Remember," I was often counseled, "the accomplice not only had to be somebody Victor trusted, it had to be somebody who would never double-cross a partner." Puerto Ricans have exceptionally strong family ties, and Victor had taken a short trip to Puerto Rico three months before the theft occurred. That was when he and the relative—presumed to be a man—had planned the caper.

The least-discussed rumor revolved around politics. Few people believed this one, but in West Hartford, detective Dana Hallenbeck—who was not privy to the FBI's wiretap and surveillance information—always maintained that Victor did it for the revolution. Dana had no proof; on the contrary, everyone interviewed by the authorities said Victor had no serious political interests. Some people even said he was apolitical, but Hallenbeck held fast. Call it a hunch, call it a good cop's sixth sense: Dana (and one or two others) believed that Victor acted on behalf

of the FALN, the only Puerto Rican nationalist group of which most Americans had heard.

Everyone had a guess, but only a few people knew the truth, and even they were busily constructing rumors. After island agents told Jim Millan the postcards were coming, they had provided no further information. Cops like Duffy and writers like me had had their appetites whetted, but the meal never arrived. People wanted Victor to get it moving. This was a hot story, especially to a local TV reporter who had learned from a local FBI agent that Victor was about to go public. Duffy refused to believe that a Fed had leaked the story, but it not only happened, it helped create a rumor among the few people who should have known better.

The rumor that quickly circulated at the West Hartford police station and the local TV station was that the videotape would arrive on September 3. Los Macheteros had apparently chosen Labor Day to publicly express their solidarity with the Puerto Rican working class. Once the tape was delivered to Channel 3, Duffy and Millan could expect to be besieged by a band of overeager reporters, who would get nothing from the police. The standing order was to plead ignorance.

In West Hartford, Labor Day is usually quite dull, since most residents are at the beach. But on this particular Labor Day in 1984 Tony Duffy hoped for some action. He came to work prepared for excitement and went home not only disappointed but exhausted, since he had spent the day anxiously pacing the floor of his twelve-by-twelve office. He'd waited a year for a break in the case, and now, when Los Macheteros were supposed to deliver, no messenger arrived. Duffy would even have settled for a scribbled note, but none appeared. Los Macheteros had broken their promise, and he was angry.

When September 10, 11, and 12 also passed with no tapes or postcards in sight, authorities moved from disappointment to concern. What was going on? Had the FBI made a mistake? Had Victor changed his mind?

Duffy joked about calling Los Macheteros, but calmer minds prevailed, and after another week of anxious waiting, Duffy finally heard from Victor and his compañeros.

Actually the first call came from Chief Frank Reynolds. It was September 18, with Duffy doing his best to relax at home at about 9:30 P.M., when the chief phoned. Dave Lesher, a reporter for

the *Hartford Courant,* had just left the chief's house. He had a postcard from Victor, and he had wanted to know if the chief thought it was authentic. For Lesher's benefit, Reynolds had displayed his formidable acting talents. ("The card could be real. We'll have to wait and see. Let's send it to Washington for handwriting analysis. I can't say much at this stage of the investigation.")

But to Duffy, the chief could tell the truth. The card was the real McCoy ("I knew Victor's handwriting at once") and, believe it or not, the card had been mailed on time! The New York postmark read September 9, but instead of to Dave Lesher, the card had been addressed to Mark Stillman, a reporter who had written some of the earliest Wells Fargo stories. Stillman no longer worked for the *Courant,* and when the card—mailed in an envelope—came in on September 10, nobody had opened it! The envelope lay around for a week until Lesher discovered what would tomorrow be a page-one story. The *Courant* had wisely checked with a handwriting expert, who had no doubt that Victor Gerena had written the card. That confirmation produced this headline on September 19, 1984: NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: GERENA MESSAGE APPEARS AUTHENTIC.

Despite foreknowledge of Victor's anniversary cards, no police officer nor FBI agent knew what Victor would say. The Levittown bugs had produced some hints, but the police read along with the rest of us as Victor did and did not announce the real motives for his $7 million haul.

The picture side of the postcard featured the Statue of Liberty. That had obvious political connotations, but nobody knew what to make of the cryptic message handwritten in blue ink on the reverse:

> Dear Mr. Stillman,
>
> Greetings from the Statute of Liberty. I enjoyed the article you and Mr. Lesher wrote almost six months ago. Mr. Nash was right on some counts, wrong on others.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Victor Manuel Gerena Ortiz
>
> P.S. I will clear up any confusion that still exists about me or what happened to the money shortly; be on the lookout.

The Nash mentioned in the card was Jay Robert Nash, the author of many popular crime books. In the September 17, 1983, *Hartford Courant* article that Victor mentioned, Nash had said Victor robbed Wells Fargo "to strike back against a system that is pretty much unfair to everyone. His is the perfect crime of fantasy for Americans. Poor to riches, the quick way; it's the American Dream. The hardest guy in the world to catch is the lone wolf. He goes where he wants and he doesn't have to listen to anyone."

But Victor said that Nash was right and wrong. Was he right about striking back against the system and wrong about the lone wolf angle? Was it the reverse, or some other combination of right and wrong? Victor's card provided no answers. It left readers waiting for more, while police privately confirmed but publicly questioned the authenticity of Victor's underground note.

Two days after the story appeared in the *Courant,* three Puerto Rican reporters discovered that they too had messages from Victor. Each journalist had received a card before the robbery's first anniversary, but for different reasons none had acted on Victor's news. At the San Juan office of EFE (the Spanish news agency), staffers had placed the postcard on a bulletin board; they thought it had come from an approving reader. Neither Maggie Bobb of the San Juan-based newspaper *El Mundo* nor Laura Candelas at the San Juan office of the Associated Press linked the cards to the robbery. However, sensing something significant, neither woman discarded Victor's gifts. Maggie Bobb put hers in a desk drawer, hoping that some event or additional communication would allow her to understand the otherwise mysterious message.

When the cards finally got the publicity Victor desired, they suggested, without actually confirming, that the robbery had political roots. Victor sent EFE a card displaying a twilight panorama of Manhattan:

> Greetings from the United States, to which Spanish speaking peoples have contributed so much and have received so little. I want to congratulate you for your work about Spanish speaking peoples and for your conscience in interpreting the problems of the Latin peoples.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Victor Manuel Gerena Ortiz.

In a postscript, Victor told EFE "to please be aware of an announcement that I will make in a few days. I will inform about time and place."

In the message to Maggie Bobb, Victor used a picture postcard of Mount Washington to carry these words:

> Dear Maggie Bobb,
>
> I congratulate you for being one of the best journalists in Puerto Rico. Besides the interest in dogs which we share* I admire your professionalism and great capacity in your work. My country needs journalists like you who help to raise the level of understanding in view of the conflicts which arise.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Victor Manuel Gerena Ortiz.
>
> P.S. Watch out for an important public announcement that I'll soon make. I'll inform you of the time and place at which it will occur.

The message to Laura Candelas was the most suggestive of all. Again Victor used a picture postcard of America's best-known political symbol:

> Greetings from the Statue of Liberty—which is what I want for the people in my country. I have been able to read your work and I know you identify with the problems of our people. I admire you very much and I urge you to continue working for justice and liberty.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Victor Manuel Gerena Ortiz.
>
> P.S. I want you to be attentive to an important public announcement I will soon make. The date and place will be indicated later on.

From Mount Washington to New York, from politics to dogs: Victor had covered a lot of territory in four short messages and, once the FBI confirmed the authenticity of the writing ("It was Victor all the way," Duffy told me) the rumor mill again ran at full speed. Victor had deliberately provided clues rather than answers, leaving interested readers hanging. As people tried to

*Ms. Bobb also wrote a pet column and Victor loved dogs.

fathom the cards' true meaning, Victor got—although two weeks late—exactly what he wanted: free publicity for himself, the robbery, and his soon-to-be-announced public statement.

While people waited, speculation naturally turned to politics. Obviously, Victor cared about the fate of his people; but if he could be a nationalist revolutionary, did he become one before or after the robbery occurred? The cards sent to Puerto Rico were written in what Maggie Bobb called "university-level Spanish," while Victor spoke and wrote what one former teacher called Spanglish. Had someone dictated the cards? Had Victor written someone else's messages? Had Victor turned political *after* he had escaped with the money? Alone, anxiously looking over his shoulder, Victor might have felt vulnerable after he had left Hartford. Perhaps he'd found comfort in a political group that gave the robbery more meaning and importance?

One factor that buoyed this rumor centered on Victor's signature. In Hartford he'd always signed his name Victor Gerena; now he'd added Manuel and Ortiz. It didn't mean much until you looked at Puerto Rican nomenclature, where men always used two last names, that of their father's father and their mother's father. The argument was that Victor's signature signaled an identity change. He used the two last names to indicate that he now took great pride in his Puerto Rican ancestry.

Even if that possibility was true, the question of timing remained. Did Victor turn political before or after the robbery? His mother was a proud member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, a group that demanded immediate independence for Puerto Rico. Perhaps friends of hers had recruited Victor in town. Perhaps he'd secretly been a member of a clandestine group for the year and a half he'd worked for Wells Fargo. The speculation was endless and, for a week or so after the cards appeared, continuous. Then interest began to wane. A front page article in *El Mundo* on October 8 kept the story alive on the island, but in Hartford people had already improvised the necessary rumors. Most interested parties had provided their own interpretations. Now it was up to Victor (with another message) or the police (with an arrest) to reveal who was right and who was wrong.

Tony Duffy had hoped the next communication would come to him, but he had no such luck. On Friday, October 19, Helen Simon, a reporter for United Press International in San Juan, received an anonymous phone call with a simple message: Be-

hind the bus station near the UPI office, reporters would discover an important communication mixed in with the trash. UPI staff raced to the bus stop and found a sheet of paper wrapped in a plastic cover. The letter came from Los Macheteros, on stationery printed with their letterhead. A full year after the event, they claimed credit for the Wells Fargo robbery, which was not a robbery but a legitimate expropriation of money owed to the Puerto Rican people.

The message said that "on the birthdate of Pedro Albizu Campos, September 12, the Revolutionary Party of Puerto Rican Workers [popularly known as Los Macheteros] carried out the military economic operative Pitirre III." The group wanted "to publicly recognize the distinguished participation of Comrade Victor Gerena." They assured readers he was "in a perfect state of health" and that he was fully integrated into Puerto Rico's battle for liberation. Indeed, according to the communiqué, Victor had long been a Machetero. He'd trained for a year and a half before the robbery took place, his personal discipline and orders from Los Macheteros had prevented injury to anyone. "Just as we have torn $7 million from the very bowels of American imperialism, the organized force of the Puerto Rican people will know how, at the right time, to wrest the liberty that will let us decide our destiny as a nation."

Victor had come through as promised. He'd dutifully made the public announcement mentioned in each postcard, *assuming* Los Macheteros were telling the truth, which was, for many people, a big assumption. Perhaps (one rumor had it) the group, sensing a good thing, wanted credit for a robbery they hadn't committed. The communiqué was typewritten; if Victor was actually a Machetero, why hadn't he written the message? The cards had proved he was still out there—unless you assumed they had been written months before, that he was now dead, and that someone was trying to throw police off the track. Why would Victor leave any uncertainty when he made the promised announcement? If he was a Puerto Rican revolutionary, prove it!

In addition to raising the doubts of skeptics, the communiqué brought several new questions to public attention. Who was Pedro Albizu Campos? What was a *pitirre?* And who were Los Macheteros? Solid clues had been sprinkled everywhere, if you had a working knowledge of Puerto Rican culture, which most Americans lack.

Pedro Albizu Campos was and is the hero of Puerto Rican

nationalists. For forty years—from the mid-1920s to his death in 1965—he led the island's struggle for independence, and for nearly twenty years Albizu had lain in federal and island prisons. He wanted independence yesterday. Yelling "Viva Puerto Rico," his followers had opened fire on the United States House of Representatives in March 1954. Biographers listed his birthdate as September 12, 1891. It was entirely possible that Victor and Los Macheteros had planned the robbery as a birthday present for Albizu and the independence movement.

A pitirre is a small bird, native to Puerto Rico and no bigger than a sparrow. Famous for its fierceness, a pitirre will attack even a hawk that blocks its path. Puerto Rican artists use them in paintings that show pitirres attacking eagles; in the pictures, the pitirre is Puerto Rico, the eagle, the United States.

The robbery was called Pitirre III because Los Macheteros had robbed Wells Fargo twice before. Until the letter arrived, no one had thought to look, but a close reading of accessible government documents showed that on September 1, 1982, and November 16, 1982, Los Macheteros had attacked Wells Fargo's Puerto Rican–based armored trucks. In the September attempt to rob a vehicle en route from San Juan to Naranjito, Puerto Rico, "the perpetrators possessed .45 caliber pistols and automatic long-barrel weapons with sound suppressors. They wore camouflage military uniforms, masks, and they carried walkie talkies."[1] The first attempt failed, but in November they had had a better plan.

Four individuals, all armed with handguns, entered a supermarket at approximately 8:50 A.M., robbed it of $12,000, and then ordered all customers and employees into the warehouse portion of the store. About 9 A.M., a Wells Fargo truck arrived. When the passenger guard entered the store to pick up its deposit, the four Macheteros demanded the keys to the cash-storage portion of the truck. Simultaneously a white Ford van approached the armored truck. At least two other individuals emerged from the white van. Carrying shoulder weapons, they ordered the driver to get out of the truck, and, as in Hartford less than a year later, the driver never tried to be a hero. He got out of the truck, the other guard opened the door to the cash, and Los Macheteros sped off with $300,000.[2]

If you believed their communiqué, the success at home must have led Los Macheteros to hope for bigger and better things on the mainland. Wells Fargo was easy pickings, and as a bonus, it was a great symbol of capitalist enterprise. Perhaps Los Ma-

cheteros had trained Victor while he worked in Hartford. And perhaps their involvement explained why Victor quickly left his first job, taken in March 1982, as a Wells Fargo security guard. Had his task been to locate a potentially huge haul, which did not exist in the facilities Victor guarded? Knowing that the trucks carried millions every day, had Victor moved on, with the approval of Los Macheteros, to the depot in West Hartford?

Since even the FBI didn't know how or when Victor had become a Machetero, the public's guesses were as good as any made by informed sources. People continued to speculate and, all the while, Millan and Duffy refused to offer any assistance. To confirm the authenticity of the Macheteros claims too quickly was to risk alerting Ojeda Rios to the existence of FBI surveillance. Better to plead ignorance to the press—with a straight face Lon Lacey told reporters that the communiqué was "an interesting lead." If that fueled the public discussion Victor wanted, it also gave the FBI an opportunity to build an even stronger case against the group. They'd hang themselves with rope provided by the FBI.

Within a week of the October 19 communiqué, reporters had located and publicized information about Los Macheteros. People now knew who the group was, but in the absence of a written or videotape message from Victor, many people still refused to believe their claims. If it was true, why didn't the FBI say so? And many people still wanted to believe in the power and efficiency of organized crime. If not that, people wanted to believe that Victor was enjoying himself. They had a hard time rejecting the notion that somewhere in South America, Victor Gerena was on a beach sipping piña coladas with a bevy of beautiful women.

Thievery was acceptable. Revolution was not. People who cheered Victor when they thought he had robbed to beat the system booed him when they suspected he had robbed to change the system. One of the most fascinating consequences of the claims of Los Macheteros was an about-face of public opinion in Hartford. Instead of seeing him as a smart kid taking his best shot, people who believed the revolutionaries' claims called Victor a fanatic or, more commonly, a tool of forces he lacked the intelligence to comprehend.

Throughout December 1984, the case appeared to be on hold. Los Macheteros remained quiet, and the FBI became increasingly distant, not only from a researcher such as myself but from the local cops as well. Bits and pieces of information filtered through the bureau's net, but after Los Macheteros had announced themselves, agents like Jim Millan were ordered to keep away from any potential source of public information. Even Tony Duffy found himself cut off, and if Duffy understood what was happening ("Jim would never do this to me unless he received explicit instructions to keep quiet"), he still felt betrayed and frustrated. It hurt to think that the Feds believed he would say something to a writer. And assuming Jim Millan knew something—the agency did have more than sixty agents on the island—it was maddening to think that somebody else would catch Victor. That collar belonged to Tony Duffy. More accurately, it belonged to Duffy until Los Macheteros took credit for Wells Fargo's $7 million debit.

Duffy did get one promise. If the Feds found Victor, they would try to let Duffy in on the arrest. It wasn't much, but it would save face for West Hartford's beleaguered department. With nothing going on, reporters began to whisper that Duffy and his detectives were "bungling boobs." Why didn't they have any leads? Why couldn't they find Victor? How had they missed the link to Los Macheteros? Every day Duffy got peppered with questions by reporters who refused to see that the case was now, once and for all, out of his and West Hartford's hands. He found out what the agents wanted him to know, which left him holding the bag in public—and reporters seemed to take pleasure in making him and the department appear incompetent. The FBI's promise to alert him to an arrest was the least they could do for a fellow officer. "They owe me" was a comment Duffy often made around Christmas 1984.

The Feds owed Duffy a great deal, but nobody owed me a thing, so I was quite surprised—and exceedingly frustrated—when school personnel told me about the phone calls. Twice Los Macheteros had tried to contact me at the university. Since it was the Christmas holidays, no one was in my office when they rang. The school operator gave the caller, who identified himself as a Machetero spokesman, my old home phone number, but since I had a new number I didn't discover that Los Macheteros had called until later. It was a wonderful experience to finally make contact with Victor's colleagues—who had seen my name and university affiliation in newspaper stories in Hartford and Puerto

Rico—not know until later I'd been called, and then have other people contacted in advance by Los Macheteros report this story.

On January 6, 1985, three men rented a large moving van. They hired a fourth fellow to drive it to the local Toys-'R'-Us store. Once the van overflowed with gifts, the next stop was Victor's old neighborhood. Within shouting distance of the Wells Fargo depot, three men dressed as biblical kings got out of the truck, opened the back door, and distributed the toys to children, who had been informed about the imminent visit by flyers sent around the day before. Everybody, including the FBI, knew what was going to happen—except, of course, me.

While they distributed the gifts, the kings took pictures of the event. In what amounted to another successful publicity campaign, these photos were sent to reporters. On January 7, 1985, page one photos appeared in *El Mundo* and the *Hartford Courant* with this explanation from Los Macheteros: "Christmas is the worst time of the year to be poor; that's why we gave the gifts." They used three men dressed as kings to underline their commitment to native culture. In the United States, as in Puerto Rico, boys and girls should make the Epiphany the high point of the holiday season. Following customs practiced for centuries, children should put out straw-filled boxes, the night before the Magi appear, for the kings' hungry camels. And as a way of saying thank you, the kings will fill the children's boxes with gifts.

That's a Puerto Rican Christmas. And Los Macheteros, eager to keep Victor in the news and to soften their militant image, also wanted to remind supporters and enemies that they had always fought a war on two fronts. Blowing up planes was part of an effort to change political power, while support of native culture encouraged Puerto Ricans to feel a legitimate sense of pride in themselves and their nation. Too many islanders had become "piti-yankees": Like Uncle Toms on the mainland, some Puerto Ricans had learned to be embarrassed by their roots and their traditions. According to Los Macheteros, Puerto Ricans had no reason to be ashamed of anything, except a failure to defend and applaud the positive aspects of traditional Puerto Rican culture.

On the streets of Hartford, Los Macheteros got the favorable publicity they wanted. Many people still whispered their praise —who knew how many Puerto Ricans actually worked for the police?—but the appearance of the Three Kings in a poor neighborhood made many Puerto Ricans feel better. Whether that feeling would last was another matter. Los Macheteros were up against eighty-eight years of American dominance and, as if that wasn't challenge enough, they were seeking to establish a sense of pride in youngsters who had never been to the island. Many of the kids who received gifts didn't speak Spanish; they said "thank you" instead of *"gracias,"* but like Victor Gerena, they might listen to the message of Los Macheteros. What the group offered was self-esteem via participation in a meaningful movement. And to kids exposed to prejudice, kids called "spics," Los Macheteros offered a way to fight back. "Remember," the anonymous caller told *El Mundo* when he broke the Three Kings story, "even though we have carried out this positive act of love, this does not mean we have abandoned the armed struggle to win independence for our island."

Los Macheteros still advocated violent conflict, but what they could not say in public was that the gift giving had produced an unexpected conflict—the Macheteros were fighting among themselves.

Conflict One centered on protocol and procedure. Tapes released by the FBI showed that when Norman Ramirez Talavera (code name Pedro) arrived in New York on December 26, 1984, to arrange for the toy giveaway, he was refused assistance by the head of a New York Machetero unit. "Too risky" was the reason given, so Ramirez, apparently unsure of his own authority, called Juan Segarra in Puerto Rico. What was Pedro to do with the $12,000 allotted for the mainland Three Kings giveaway? Segarra said to contact the number two person in the same New York unit. Ramirez did as he was asked, and when he quickly got the second Machetero's assistance, the public act of love produced private acrimony. There was an immediate split in the New York unit, and another feud on the island, because Ojeda Rios felt that Segarra had violated elementary rules of Machetero procedure. The group operated via a chain of command, and if the New York comrade felt the operation was too risky, Segarra should have canceled his plans. Appealing to the next level of authority had produced a battle among comrades. The event had also threatened security. Operating outside of established channels, the giveaway recruited locals to act as kings. Ojeda feared these men might be anything from FBI plants to Puerto Rican blabbermouths.

Ojeda Rios was angry—at one point in their battling he called Segarra "a son of a whore"—but like other Macheteros, he had complaints that included far more than procedural matters.

Conflict Two centered on personality. Success had so overinflated Segarra's ego that others found him hard to live with. After acting as one of the Three Kings in a January 6 toy giveaway on the island, Segarra said, "I felt great there. I felt like a movie star." People were taking pictures; "there was a guy there for the mikes," and the admiration of others was hard to resist. "They were already there, waiting for our arrival. They asked, 'To whom do we give the credits? How do you want us to organize the children? Do you want them on line?' "

By his own admission, Segarra became "arrogant." Even his wife agreed that Juan's personality had become a problem. Ironically, at a time when the group was finally receiving a great deal of positive publicity, comrades were fighting comrades, and, all the while, the FBI not only listened in but participated in the Three Kings celebration. In Hartford, an agent watched the giveaway take place and, perhaps feeling a bit arrogant himself, got on line to receive a toy, a ham, and a $20 bill. The FBI had the group on tape, on film, and on location. Men like Ramirez had been added to the list of potential targets for indictments, and the group apparently had no idea they were being monitored. Since Segarra's arrogance indicated ignorance of the FBI's movements, the bureau again exercised patience. Perhaps this arrogance would produce the evidence needed to apprehend the people who made big decisions for Los Macheteros?

Nearly three weeks after the Three Kings giveaway, Los Macheteros kept their word about the use of violence. On January 25, 1985, armed with a bazooka, they attacked the Federal Court Building in San Juan because it housed the military's recruitment office. Why, Los Macheteros asked, was it acceptable for a Puerto Rican to risk his life in military service when he had no right to vote in the federal elections that sanctioned United States participation in Korea or Vietnam?

It was a good question. But few people in Hartford knew Los Macheteros had asked it. The attack received no publicity in the United States, and the FBI, more tight-lipped than ever, offered a "no comment" to anyone requesting information. In West Hartford, Tony Duffy said he "didn't know a thing about what was going on," and, while my local contacts were pleased by the

assault, even they had no idea how or why it fit into the long-range plans of Los Macheteros.

With so many people keeping quiet, my own options were now seriously limited. I could stop investigating a case and a people that fascinated me; I could patiently wait until Los Macheteros staged another event, hoping that a fresh provocation would produce fresh leads; or I could try to find new sources of information, not in Hartford, but in Puerto Rico. That, after all, was where Los Macheteros lived. When I finally convinced a close friend of Victor's to act as a cultural guide, we took off for Puerto Rico. Naturally, I wanted to talk to Victor (at the time I thought he was on the island), but my more important aim was to locate a high-ranking Machetero who, I hoped, would discuss the group's policies and practices. Since the wall of official silence had me stymied and I wanted more than was being offered by local activists, the trip seemed the only way to satisfy my curiosity and, not incidentally, complete the research that would allow this book to be written.

On the island I might find out what was really going on. Or I might get killed. Even though I did not fear Los Macheteros, what about the FBI's informant? Remember, I'd believed Lon Lacey and assumed that only a high-ranking Machetero would have had prior knowledge of the postcards and communiqués. How could I be sure that if I met a Machetero, he or she would not be a double agent? My biggest fear was of getting caught in an FBI–Machetero crossfire. The informant would know that someone higher up had agreed to see me and would tip off the FBI. When agents said "Hands up!" who'd be inside taking the blame for the bureau's mysterious appearance?

Although the prospect of a violent death was less than appealing, I saw no alternative to the trip. Now that Los Macheteros were involved, my book would still focus on Victor, but now, even more importantly, it would concern the political status of the Puerto Rican people. After I got my will in order, Carlos (a pseudonym) and I left for the island in January 1985. Neither of us really expected to find Victor, but anything was possible. Since I knew that Los Macheteros had told Maggie Bobb of *El Mundo* that they would let her interview Victor when "conditions seemed right," perhaps I'd beat her to the punch and get a scoop any real reporter would envy.

I had my doubts. But, if nothing else, I was no longer an academic sitting in an ivory tower.

LAS MONTANAS (THE MOUNTAINS)

After a near disastrous beginning, including arriving at the airport late, and two mad dashes between the gate and the ticket counter—resulting from the ticketing agent giving me only one ticket when I had purchased two—Carlos prepared me for a different sort of arrival. He said that islanders always applauded when the plane touched down in San Juan. It was a custom that made each of Carlos's many trips to the island end on a pleasant note. He looked forward to the applause and was not disappointed, because ("Didn't I tell you?") people clapped as soon as the plane hit Puerto Rican soil.

Arriving a little after midnight, we immediately set out for the island's mountainous interior. A Hartford source had a "hunch" that if I would travel to the center of traditional independentista territory, I might be contacted by "interested parties." Before leaving Hartford, I'd bought a gaudy CONNECTICUT bumper sticker and packed two copies of the *Courant*'s Three Kings story. My instructions were to use the rented car—which should have four doors—as an advertising poster. With the bright orange sticker on the trunk, and two copies of the newspaper laying on the back windowsill, my presence would be obvious. The main streets in villages in the mountains were two or three city blocks long; like an orange flare on a dark road, the car would quickly catch people's attention. The rest was up to Los Macheteros.

To get to Ponce, the coastal city that would be our base, normally took two hours. Our trip took four because Carlos deliberately got us lost. Since someone could be following us, instead of speeding our way to Ponce and sleep, we crawled through Old San Juan, surrounded by groups of happy youngsters. They'd just left a concert and hardly noticed when they blocked the road. I reached for the horn, but Carlos told me about another island custom. In Puerto Rico you waited. You didn't blow your horn. You just waited.

At two in the morning, waiting was not my style. Eventually we got through and, once on the brand-new highway, Carlos wanted to sleep. He said that I was to drive for roughly two hours, that sooner or later a Ponce sign would appear, and, that when

I spotted it, I was to wake him. By the way, I must not stop, for any reason, on the way to Ponce. Robbers sometimes hid near the lightless road, and in sharp contrast to Los Macheteros, thieves had no patriotic motives. They just took your money, and your life.

Carlos slept, I bit my nails, and at 4 A.M. we checked into a hotel. By six we were again on the road but, before we even got out of Ponce, we were reminded of Victor. A Wells Fargo armored truck exactly like those used in Hartford stopped right in front of our car and, given what we knew about Wells Fargo's operation, the truck's bumper sticker seemed like a good luck charm. It read: "Wells Fargo—We perform with pride."

No one who values their life drives quickly through the Puerto Rican mountains. In second or third gear, you slowly wind your way up roads that are little more than one lane wide, praying that no one is coming in the opposite direction. Normally your prayers are answered. Day after day, the roads are as quiet as the surrounding countryside is beautiful. You don't see crowds of people, but around many S curves are landscapes that are simply breathtaking. The lush vistas would make even James Watt take notice. If the views didn't capture his imagination, he couldn't ignore the exquisite flowers—what seemed to be poinsettia trees—that fill the gardens. Nature had handed out beauty bountifully in the Puerto Rican mountains.

Before we left Hartford, Carlos had told me that if Los Macheteros hid in the mountains, they had the perfect spot. Standing on a mountain top, I understood what he had meant. No outsider could ever penetrate the wall of silence thrown up by nature and the mountains' inhabitants. The National Guard or the FBI could send hundreds of people to comb the landscape, and they might find something or someone, but only a native traitor could help police find Los Macheteros. In the mountains, $7 million would fit into the landscape as neatly as the famous *coqui.**

The success of my plan depended on my obviousness. I must have been the only man in Puerto Rico without a mustache, and my barely adequate Spanish had a New York accent. As I made contacts (Carlos stayed on the sidelines to avoid any legal problems), people must have made one of three guesses: This guy is

*The *coqui* is a singing tree frog. Coquis belt out a delightful song and are a positive symbol to virtually all Puerto Ricans.

loco, he's a cop, or he's a writer trying to get everybody's side of the story.

People seemed to believe me. A stop at one of many roadside taverns led me to a grocery store in town, and that led to the home of a remarkable man. On a polished stone floor stood four or five fine wicker chairs. Directly before two pictures of the Puerto Rican flag—one crocheted and one made from wire—was a Nativity scene of the baby Jesus receiving a visit from the Three Kings. Senor Lopez, a man in his middle fifties, easily managed to combine a socialist nationalism with traditional Christianity. He knew about Los Macheteros, but if they were in the area, only one person could authorize my visit. That was Senora Rodriguez, who would be in San Juan or perhaps Mayagüez until early the next morning. Could I wait? I naturally said, "Of course," and after I told Lopez the name of our hotel, Carlos and I set off for Cerro Maravilla. It was an hour away, but as long as we had time to spare, I wanted to see a spot that, according to some journalists, legitimized the independence movement.

Cerro Maravilla means marvelous mountain. It is four thousand feet above the sea, and despite a location that is isolated, even for the mountains, during the summer the narrow path to the highest point in Puerto Rico is filled with tourist buses. Eight years after the event that made it famous, Maravilla still acts as a magnet for islanders. Our guide, Senor Rentas, who lived just below Maravilla, complained that he hated the influx of city slickers, but he assumed an air of solemnity as we entered what is arguably a national monument to the independentista cause.

On July 25, 1978, two young nationalists (and one young police spy who had been recruited in high school) tried to blow up the television tower that still sits above Maravilla. They chose July 25 because it is the anniversary of both the American invasion in 1898 and the adoption of the Commonwealth constitution in 1952. The nationalists probably hoped that blowing up a tower on such a symbolic day would energize the island's independentistas. Arnáldo Dario Rosado, Carlos Soto Arrivi, and Alejandro Gonzalez Malave (the spy) commandeered a taxi in Ponce, drove it to Maravilla, and walked into an ambush arranged by Gonzalez and the police who commanded him.

Police waited until the men came into the compound and then opened fire. Gonzalez immediately was hit, but the two nationalists escaped injury. Apparently realizing their predicament, Dario and Soto surrendered. Police forced the men to their knees, handcuffed their arms behind their backs, and as the two independentistas pleaded for justice, the police tortured and murdered them.

At first Governor Romero Barcelo, an advocate of statehood, played politics with Cerro Maravilla. He praised the "heroic actions" of officers who had obviously acted in self-defense. But as the scandal slowly unfolded, with an impact in Puerto Rico similar to that of Watergate in the United States, Romero reversed course. He was "tremendously surprised," but with two officers and a witness (the technician manning the tower) telling the same horrible story, Romero admitted the truth. It was murder.

And a never-ending national sensation. Ten police officers were tried and convicted of perjury in 1985, island reporters are still trying to link Romero to the murders, and independentistas writing in *Libertad* noted that "if you compare the ambush at Maravilla to Los Macheteros' ambush of the Navy bus at Sebana Seca [in 1979], which of these two aroused the indignation of the people? How many protests were heard about the ambush [in which two American sailors died], how many pickets . . . ?"

And how many memorials to revolutionaries exist on land owned and maintained by the state those revolutionaries were trying to overthrow? It's an amazing testimony to the indignation aroused by Maravilla that directly below the television tower are two gravestones and a Puerto Rican flag. On the day we visited (a January weekday), roughly twenty people milled about Dario's and Soto's graves, while one couple with two children stood near the rope that fenced off the memorial. Carlos hoped the man was telling his children, "Remember Maravilla."

As we drove back to Ponce, Carlos suggested we have dinner with his family. Presumably, our contacts had been made and with a night free, we headed out to La Parguera, a bay famous for its phosphorescent water. The trip took about forty minutes, and I had no idea we were being followed. During a four-hour evening that included a long boat ride and an endless search for a restaurant with a free table, I noticed only a husband, wife, two kids, and grandmother who followed us into the restaurant. Like us, they were probably willing to settle for anything, but they made a bit of a stir when they asked the waiter to locate a high chair, which proved difficult to set up. Nothing else caught my attention. We ate, the food was terrible, and about midnight, I hit

the sack. It had been a pleasant but uneventful evening. Or so I thought.

The next night, deep in the mountains, I went to see Senora Rodriguez. She had finally returned from San Juan or Mayagüez, and my instructions were to wait at a particular roadside tavern. Further orders would be forthcoming. Meanwhile, it seemed like a good idea to have dinner.

In a small tavern overflowing with people, I sat down to an enormous helping of sausage and rice. I was quite relaxed when the previous evening's husband, wife, two kids, and grandmother arrived. My stomach dropped to the floor. This was no coincidence. Not two hours from La Parguera, this deep in the mountains, this late at night, and at this particular restaurant. What do I do? I stared at the man and his family. He immediately knew I knew. And I immediately knew he knew I knew. I was about to panic when he started a conversation. He introduced me to the family, openly admitted that they had followed us the night before—plus all day today—because he had been assigned to check me out. Perhaps I was FBI? Or a local cop? Or a reporter with an axe to grind? Whatever the case, I would see no one until my identity and my intentions had been thoroughly ascertained.

Apparently I'd passed muster. Just before my tail and his family sat down to dinner, he told me to wait until additional orders were given. Nervous, I went outside to get some air. I was walking around trying to collect my thoughts when two cars pulled up. The makes and models escaped me—I noticed only that the windows were the kind that let the occupants see out but that prevent pedestrians from seeing in.

I was too paralyzed to say my prayers. After a twenty-second inspection, the cars left. That was it, except for a quarter-hour-long bout of giddiness on my part. Shortly after I regained my composure, another car came up and the driver said that Senora Rodriguez would see me. I followed this fellow for about ten minutes when, climbing up a gravel road, he suddenly shut off his lights. I felt I was in a suspense thriller, and my mind was conjuring up all sorts of grisly scenarios. Soon I arrived at a house. It was dark upon my arrival, but the lights began to come on, and a distinguished-looking woman came out to say "Hola."

At first she tested me. What did I want, *"en español por favor"* (in Spanish, please). *"No hablo ingles"* (I don't speak English), so our conversation had to take place in Spanish. I told her about my

book and asked to see Victor Gerena or any available Machetero. Although it was hard going, I got my message across. Then, in impeccable English, Senora Rodriguez said she thought she could help me. Of course, she was not affiliated with Los Macheteros, and she had no idea where Victor was, but he was a Machetero, and if I was willing to go to San Juan, she thought she could arrange an interview with a member of the group.

How would the individual know me? So that I could avoid further attacks of giddiness Senora Rodriguez wrote a short message on an inside page of the *Courant*'s Three Kings story: "A friend wanted you to have this." The person I interviewed would recognize Senora Rodriguez's handwriting, and, like a passport, the *Hartford Courant* would allow me to enter, anxiety free, into Machetero territory.

The drive home was torturous. Roads that are hazardous by day become nightmarish at one in the morning. I crawled down the mountain, afraid of an automobile accident and afraid that I might become a moving target. By now it was clear that I would be followed throughout my stay. I understood that people had to be suspicious. But if Los Macheteros were tailing me, was the FBI tailing them? Did Car A belong to Los Macheteros? And Car B to the FBI? Or was it the other way around?

Appearances became whatever I made them, as Puerto Rican after Puerto Rican undoubtedly wondered why the American stared so intently at every person and car he saw.

My instructions had been quite specific. In San Juan, call Dr. Gonzalez (a pseudonym) at precisely 12:15 P.M. The doctor picked up the phone himself and immediately told me to wait a moment: He was switching our call to another, safe phone. When he returned, he told me to come to his office at once. He would change an appointment, but even with the switch, he could spare no more than an hour.

I was excited. A policymaker had finally agreed to an extensive interview about Los Macheteros. Perhaps I'd even get to see Victor. According to my original plan, I should have returned to Connecticut yesterday, but like Dr. Gonzalez, I could rearrange my schedule if the need arose.

As soon as I gave him the *Courant* that carried Senora Rodriguez's message, the doctor was gracious and well-mannered. Unfortunately, he didn't know anything about Los Macheteros!

Indeed he had no idea why anyone would think he could provide information about Puerto Rico's clandestine groups. It was true that he sympathized with any islander seeking independence, but I probably knew more about Los Macheteros than he did. What did I want to talk about? His time was mine.

Dumbfounded and angry, I terminated what then seemed to be a farce. What was going on? Why suggest I'd be welcome on the island, spend days following me, begin to introduce me to a network of Macheteros or Machetero sympathizers, and suddenly clam up? Wouldn't it have been better to have played dumb from the start and to have saved everyone a great deal of time?

It made no sense until someone in Hartford provided an explanation. At the very last minute, Dr. Gonzalez had gotten word that something didn't look right. It had nothing to do with me, but a man who knew he was being bugged took no chances, and the doctor had to play dumb. And I had to go home without the intimate details that still dangled before my mind's eye, like a brass ring on a merry-go-round.

The trip was a failure. That's what I thought until Hartford doors that had formerly been closed to me were suddenly opened. I had apparently passed a litmus test when I had traveled to the mountains (as Senora Rodriguez told me on another trip, "We had to check you out, didn't we?"). As the weeks went by, I was given access to some of the documents I wanted to see, I was told many new details about Victor, and I was slowly allowed to discover that a large number of Puerto Rican nationalists lived in Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, New York, Dorchester, Chicago, and any other place that housed a large Puerto Rican population.

The United States was crawling with avid independentistas. And as the Macheteros announced on April 1, 1985, when you hassled one of them, you risked being hassled by the rest of them.

Word came in the form of another letter to the *Hartford Courant*. Los Macheteros said that, as usual, the grand jury investigating the Wells Fargo robbery was being used as a repressive tool. People like Victor's mother had had absolutely nothing to do with the robbery, yet they were still being threatened with jail if they failed to answer questions, not only about the robbery, but about their friends and acquaintances as well. Los Macheteros

said this was contemptible. They repeated their claim that they were responsible for the Wells Fargo loss, sending half of a $10 bill from the robbery as verification (the FBI confirmed that it was genuine), and they hoped that this would once and for all end the "harassment" of local activists. If the authorities kept issuing their fishing-expedition subpoenas, then Los Macheteros implied that they would retaliate with force.

The threat seemed to work since subpoenas that had already been served—for example, Victor's friend Cesar Carmona received one—were suddenly nullified. Prosecutors stopped telling people they could go to jail for refusing to testify but those same people never stopped telling me how the grand jury was "a tool of American colonialism."

That seemed a bit farfetched, but as I investigated their claims, I drew two conclusions: The nationalists had a point, and no matter what the issue—the robbery, Vieques, or the grand jury—everything revolved around the question of the political status of the Puerto Rican people. If you are a Machetero, how do you respond to a subpoena? Do you burn it? Do you refuse to recognize the government's authority to even issue it? Or do you attend the hearing but refuse to answer any questions that concern the beliefs and actions of others? The nationalist literature suggests all three responses.

The dominant attitude is noncompliance, which, since September 1982, has put nine independentistas in jail for criminal contempt of court. Most people who refuse to testify before a grand jury are found guilty of civil contempt—with a maximum eighteen-month sentence—but Puerto Rican nationalists have received the treatment accorded to Mafia chieftains. They are charged with criminal contempt, and since that "crime" has no maximum penalty attached to it, the nationalists are at the mercy of the judges, who often display little compassion for precedent or the political position of the nationalists.

The case of Carlos Noya Murati is a good example. At age thirty he was serving his second prison term for refusing to testify before a federal grand jury. In his first case, Carlos was subpoenaed to appear before the grand jury investigating the Sebana Seca attack by Los Macheteros. No one suggested that Carlos had participated in the assault, but since he was a vocal member of a highly vocal group, the Puerto Rican Socialist League, the prosecutor apparently assumed Carlos would know something about

Los Macheteros. When Carlos reported to the grand jury and refused to take the oath of allegiance to a country he did not recognize, the judge put him in prison on civil contempt charges for seventeen months. When Carlos got out, another subpoena arrived from a Brooklyn grand jury investigating the 1982 FALN bombings on Wall Street. When he again refused the oath, the judge sentenced Carlos—on criminal contempt charges—to two years in federal prison.

Carlos's case is recalled in a ceremony that occurs every Friday afternoon in front of the Federal Courthouse in Old San Juan. Along with other family members, Carlos's father pickets for one hour each week to protest his son's incarceration. He carries a sign—*"Mi hijo no es un delincuente"* (My son is not a criminal) —and he says that his son's jailing is a grave disservice "to democracy and justice." Indeed, "this kind of treatment went out with the Spanish Inquisition."

This attitude would surprise no one if Carlos's father was a noted nationalist. But he is a fifty-nine-year-old dentist who was trained at the University of Maryland, a past vice-president of the American Dental Association who now serves on the group's judicial council. To top off his list of credentials, Carlos Noya, Sr. was a founder of both the United Statehooders Party and the now powerful New Progressive Party, the only major movement in Puerto Rico that advocates immediate statehood.

In Puerto Rico, the status issue divides people and families. In the United States we argue about the Democrats versus the Republicans, conservatives versus liberal progressives. In Puerto Rico, before arguing about political philosophies and programs, people must discuss what they are and what they should be: a state? a Commonwealth? a nation? In the United States, people can fight bitter political battles because of a prior consensus about the legitimacy of the constitution and the authority it delegates. Puerto Ricans have no such luxury. They are still asking the most basic political question: What are we?

NOTES

1. FBI Oversight and Authorization, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism of the Committee of the Judiciary, United States Senate, 98th Congress, February 2, 1983, 61.
2. Ibid., 61.

7

Yesterday Is Today

KNOWLEDGE often engenders conceit, especially for professors. Information blows up our heads, which leads to pompous preening, which leads to students seeking out any chance to prove us wrong. Quite rightfully, students have great fun trying to deflate the overblown egos of overbearing teachers, who sometimes take their conceit on the road. For example, two or three months into my research on the involvement of the United States in Puerto Rican history, I decided I knew everything. Long hours in the library had stimulated in me the urge to pontificate, and, sitting with a nationalist friend, I began to lecture on the Treaty of Paris. Juan would naturally enjoy listening because, although he had a good mind, he'd never completed college. I would bring him the fruits of my knowledge.

Juan listened, quite patiently. Then, as I began to discuss a relatively obscure speech by Whitelaw Reid (one of the five Americans to negotiate the agreement that "gave" Puerto Rico to the United States), my friend took over. He knew the Reid remarks backward and forward, and, as he not so politely put me in my place, Juan underlined two characteristics of virtually all the nationalists I know well.

First, they read, analyze, and thoroughly comprehend their nation's history. A scholar might argue that they are not objective, but any teacher would be delighted to have a student as motivated and conscientious as a serious independentista. They strive to know their nation's past in intimate detail.

And the knowledge of that past lights up these people's eyes. For them, the facts are never dry, boring, or dead, because all nationalists root their personal identities and political ideology in Indian, Spanish, and American history. Yesterday is today, because until the cultural and political consequences of the past have been erased or reinterpreted, there is no future. For nationalists, the past is a guide to the reasons for radical social change, and life will really begin when Puerto Rico is free. Victor, for

example, knew the history long before he became a committed Machetero.*

In conversation, my informants will often jump from Columbus to Coolidge, from an Indian uprising in 1511 to the assault on President Truman in 1950. At first the three- and four-century leaps seemed arbitrary until I got a gentle admonition from the head of Los Macheteros: If you want to understand Puerto Rican nationalists, "you must remember that ours is a country with five hundred years of colonial deformity on its shoulders." For Los Macheteros, the hated link that ties the past together is foreign invasion and control. Indeed, modern history starts when, despite God's sponsorship, Christopher Columbus is devilishly cruel to the Indians of Boriquén.

GOD'S WORK

The colleagues of Rodrigo Borgia called him a wolf, his seven children called him Daddy, and he got himself called Pope Alexander VI. Borgia wanted the papal post so badly that he openly paid off the opposition. Four mule loads of bullion convinced wavering colleagues to give him their votes, and in 1492, Borgia became the spiritual head of the Catholic Church. With children like the infamous Lucrezia and Cesare, the Pope rarely had time for religious affairs. Family scandals and quarrels occupied a good part of his everyday life but on May 3, 1493, Alexander VI issued a Papal Bull that claimed divine authority for a gift to the Catholic kings of Spain: Everything royal envoys found on their voyages to the Indies belonged to the Spanish monarchs and to their heirs and successors. Only the Spanish could develop the countries, islands, and people their explorers discovered.[1]

Five months later, Christopher Columbus sailed into Boriquén. He brought, on this, his second voyage to the Indies, astronomers, cartographers, adventurers, laborers, and a small group of natives of the island. Prisoners of a Caribbean war when they had met Columbus on what is today the Dominican Republic, the Taino Indians spoke of Boriquén with such pride and passion that the great explorer decided to investigate. He sailed them home, the Taino jumped ship the moment they spied their homeland, and Columbus never told them they no longer owned

*Chapter 10 contains a detailed discussion of Victor's aims and motives.

their exquisite island. In the name of Spain, Columbus laid claim to everything the eye could see, and before the gleeful Taino reached shore, Boriquén had a new name. In honor of Queen Isabella's son, Boriquén became San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist) on November 19, 1493.

Guesses vary, but most scholars agree that thirty to fifty thousand is a reasonable estimate of the original Taino population. Short and copper-colored, with high cheekbones, the Taino were a peaceful group who relished Boriquén's natural beauty and soothing climate. Today vestiges of Taino culture are present in the English language—the words *canoe, tobacco, maize,* and *hammock* are all Taino derivatives—but, even in Puerto Rico, vestiges are all that remain of the Taino people. By midcentury the Spanish had essentially destroyed the culture and the bodies of the Taino Indians.[2]

Murder was one technique used by the Spanish, but as soon as serious colonization began in 1508, disease and forced labor killed as many Indians as the most savage Spaniard. It is a terrible irony that one apparent reason for the Indians' belief in Spanish immortality was the resistance of the colonizers to the diseases they introduced. When Indians died while the Spanish stood tall, the bringers of disease were thought to be divine.[3]

When the Spanish discovered gold, Boriquén got another change of name—to Puerto Rico, or rich port, in 1511—and, under men like Juan Ponce de León, the island's riches were shipped to Spain. The natives were made to work the mines, and as their numbers dwindled, they labored alongside African slaves who eventually became a mainstay of the Puerto Rican labor force. A population count made in 1530 recorded 597 whites, 1,523 slaves, and 1,148 Indians.

By 1540 the gold was gone, and so were many of the Spaniards who had come to mine it. Visitors from Peru told fabulous tales of Inca wealth, and as if in a stampede, the Spaniards rushed to grab it. At one point, the exodus was severe enough to warrant new legislation: Emigration became a crime, punishable, in some cases, by the loss of a leg.[4]

With the gold gone, Puerto Rico changed. It had always been prized as a strategic gateway to the Caribbean, and with no easy wealth to exploit, Puerto Rico's military function constituted its primary value. Soldiers manned the garrison. If they had little need or desire to commercially develop agriculture, neither did the kings of Spain. When settlers did successfully establish sugar plantations, the contradictions of Spanish policy encouraged failure. Colonists could sell only to the crown, but the king rarely sent ships to collect the crops.

When the Spanish did take notice, it was to place an even greater emphasis on Puerto Rico's military role. Nearby the English, French, and Dutch had also brought the Old World to the New. Not content with the islands they already owned, they cast greedy eyes on Puerto Rico and Vieques, whose rich soil and abundant food supply made it a tempting target.* The Spanish, busy enough defending Puerto Rico, now had to protect the offshore island as well.

In 1598, the Spanish resisted an English attempt to take Puerto Rico, but with San Juan's houses, castle, and fortress in ruins, the results for the island were overwhelmingly negative. Spain now made fortification its only priority for the island, exempted the military governors from traditional restraints on their power, and thoroughly institutionalized a dependent relationship when it linked survival to money that arrived from Spain. Puerto Rico literally became a fortress, manned by Spain's misfits and lawbreakers. The island got the mother country's castoffs, and as long as these men kept the British and Dutch at bay, the Spanish government did not bother with Puerto Rico. At one point in the middle of the sixteenth century, not a single ship came to the island for twelve years.[5]

Meanwhile Puerto Rico's inhabitants reacted to the situation created by others. At the entrance to San Juan bay, the fort called La Fortaleza became the "civilized" center of Puerto Rican life. Power rested with the Spanish soldiers, and when the walls around the city were completed in 1641, San Juan was protected from ocean predators and from the mountain runaways who farmed Puerto Rico's interior. The upper classes lived in San Juan, while outside the fortress, slaves, deserters, and Indians created the *jíbaro* life-style so important to today's nationalists.† As Filiberto Ojeda Rios suggested in an interview after his arrest on August 30, how could a Puerto Rican patriot not identify with those who first said no to the colonialists?

*The abundance of crabs led explorers to call Vieques Crab Island.

†Jíbaros refers to islanders who created an independent, agrarian life-style in Puerto Rico's mountainous regions. Nationalists applaud jíbaros because they revere traditional Puerto Rican beliefs and values.

Despite Spain's military emphasis, there was some early agricultural development. Immigrants from Spain and soldiers who stayed on after their tours of duty established sugar plantations on the coast, while others turned to the ginger that was for centuries a splendid product of Puerto Rico. But because the island was limited to trade with Spain and ruled by soldiers with no long-term stake in the island's development, agriculture floundered. At the end of the eighteenth century, farmers produced less sugar than their ancestors had at the end of the sixteenth century.

In an economic and political sense, Puerto Rico slept until the late eighteenth century. A reliable account, written in 1765 by Major Alexander O'Reilly, an Irish soldier in the Spanish army, reported a total population of only 45,000 people. Entire sections of the island remained virtually undeveloped, local markets and internal trade were almost nonexistent, and to supplement the spartan life-styles created by Spanish policy, the island's inhabitants happily bartered goods with any buccaneer willing to use Puerto Rico's many harbors and coves. Pirates took the island's surplus, and they alone provided the economic incentives Spain refused to furnish. In a very critical mood, O'Reilly told his superiors that "this illicit trade which in the rest of America is so detrimental to the interests of the King and Spanish trade has been useful here. The King owes to it the increase in the products of the Island, and the vassals although poor and lazy are doing more than could otherwise be expected."[6]

The Spanish finally decided to take an interest in their formerly rich port. They sent immigrants. And then they sent more immigrants. Between 1765 and 1776, the population increased by 50 percent and in the next twenty-five years, it increased by 100 percent. Puerto Rico was on the move. Outsiders in search of a rich port would once again transform the island, but instead of free workers the Spanish elite used slaves.

It had been a remarkable fact of Puerto Rican life that despite the social barriers separating San Juan from the rest of the island, virtually all Puerto Ricans up to this point had considered color irrelevant. In the United States, color was a major axis of social life; in Puerto Rico, at least up to roughly 1800, nobody cared. Most Spanish soldiers arrived without families and quickly married the natives. In the mountains, the copper, white, and black inhabitants mixed so well that only the most determined racist could make skin color a basis for discrimination. Wealth, religion, education, ties to the Spanish mainland: These might make one person "better" than another, but until the transformation prompted by O'Reilly's report, color rarely acted as a barrier to social or political intercourse.[7]

Conditions changed when the new immigrants tried to transform the economy. They wanted real coffee and sugar plantations. They brought large numbers of slaves from Africa, and with them came a policy of outright discrimination. Whites got the right to occupy twice the amount of land granted to "mixed races," and with slaves tied to plantations, Puerto Rico had its first experience of institutional racism. Thankfully, two hundred years of color blindness blunted the effects of the new policy—Puerto Rico has always remained free of the racist horrors of the United States and South Africa—but significant changes were produced, first by men like O'Reilly, and then by the American, French, Haitian, and Mexican revolutions.

Once the Haitian revolution occurred in 1792, the French island Saint Domingue no longer served as the world's foremost producer of sugar. To satisfy the demand, other sources had to be found, and although Cubans eagerly scrambled to fill the void, Spain lacked the fleet required for the huge trade increase. Spain continued the attempt to thoroughly monopolize its colonies' goods; crops sailed on Spanish ships or, theoretically, not at all. Since this policy spelled ruin for the Cubans, as they pressed Spain for change, they illegally shipped their sugar and molasses on British and American ships. This satisfied everybody but the Spanish; yet, in the midst of a war in Europe and revolution in the colonies, the Spanish wisely decided to cut their losses and allow Cuba—and Puerto Rico—to ship their goods on foreign vessels.[8]

Thus the Americans had the Haitians to thank for lucrative new trade contacts in the Caribbean. And Puerto Ricans, who at that time knew little about their northern neighbor, suddenly found themselves shipping enormous quantities of sugar to the United States. Trade in both directions increased rapidly and, of far greater long-term significance, Americans finally had a stake in the Caribbean's future.

Meanwhile, the money to be made in sugar and coffee, in addition to the revolutionary precedents in Mexico, the United States, and France, gave Puerto Ricans a motivation to seek

major political change. Islanders knew the Spanish were vulnerable, and they didn't care if the crown capitulated only to save the vestiges of its once-mighty empire. Since what the prospering commercial farmers wanted above all else was free trade and new markets for their goods, the changes they proposed had little to do with increased rights and opportunities for the vast majority of Puerto Ricans. On the contrary, one of the rights finally granted to islanders, in 1815, was that of buying as many human beings as they wanted. A nation that had had 13,000 slaves in 1801 contained 50,000 in 1846.[9]

Puerto Ricans demanded the increased autonomy needed to make big money, and they got it. But in documents like the *Cedula de Gracias* (Certificate of Thanks) of 1815 the Spanish made Puerto Rico such a safe haven for routed colonial monarchists that, as colony after colony fell, a mass migration of royalist partisans flocked to the island. At one of the most revolutionary moments in Western history, Puerto Rico not only stayed on the sidelines, it became the last bastion of Spanish power. Immediately after the Venezuelans gained their independence at Carabobo in 1821, nine ships filled with émigrés arrived in Puerto Rico. And the defeated Spanish general, Miguel de la Torre, instead of retiring in ignominy became governor of Puerto Rico.[10]

The island moved into the nineteenth century looking backward. Émigrés added a fresh dose of royalist medicine, heading administrations dedicated to the preservation of Spanish power. In league with the royalists, ambitious Puerto Ricans established the plantation economy that did nothing to create, much less raise, the political consciousness of the Puerto Rican masses. "As mothers, when scolding their children began to [and still] cry, What do you think this is, a Republic?"[11]

Nobody had that illusion, least of all the laborers affected by the development of commercial agriculture. At the end of the eighteenth century, only 5 to 6 percent of Puerto Rico's usable land was cultivated. This readily available, quite fertile soil made a tempting target for immigrants eager to supply the world's growing demand for coffee and sugar. But who was going to work the large estates—*las haciendas*—that aspiring developers foresaw? Slaves answered part of the need, yet slaves often caused as many problems as they solved. People were expensive to buy, abolitionist sentiment made them harder and harder to procure,

and although crops like sugar and coffee needed only seasonal labor, slaves had to be fed year round. In poor labor markets, slaves were an acceptable source of manpower, but commercial developers had an even better alternative—wage labor—if they could somehow eradicate a system that dated back to the 1500s.

Puerto Ricans called them *agregados*. They were the squatters—military deserters, runaway slaves, surviving Indians—who established subsistence farms on property that might or might not belong to someone else. With so much land to choose from and so few soldiers to stop them, people settled where they wanted and, from one generation to another, retained control of "their" farms. Life was often hard, but a people accustomed to directing their own affairs had no intention of trading in their squatters' rights for a plantation owner's machete. Puerto Rico already had enough slaves.

But with the demands for coffee and sugar laborers increasing, the royalist government, cheered on by many of Puerto Rico's wealthy landowners, replaced tradition with compulsion. All unemployed landless peasants had to work on local plantations and farms. Agregados naturally claimed they owned the land they worked but since they had no deeds, the government denied their natural rights. Landless peasants would work where the government dictated, and, when the agregados continued to resist, the Spanish governors resorted to a system of passbooks. Workers at all times had to carry *libretas* in which hacienda owners recorded the frequency and quality of that person's efforts. Bad marks and missing books often resulted in severe penalties but even if the sanctions could be avoided, people without legal rights were still forced to work on the plantations. In an economy totally devoted to agriculture, what other choice did the now landless peasants have?

Ironically, as the agregados lost their rights, many of the people who had helped the Spanish take them away complained of abuses by the crown. Spain, once again under a blind, self-righteous leadership, began in the 1830s to take away the political privileges of the colonists.* In 1838, Puerto Rican soldiers tried to take over the government. Unfortunately one of the plotters alerted the Spanish authorities, and the coup failed before it began. Garroting was the punishment quickly meted out to the

*For example, active participation in the Spanish legislature.

guilty soldiers, but even this failed to satisfy the Spanish. For years they used the plot (and slave revolts) to justify a "forced peace." Any *criollo* (native Puerto Rican) suspected of so much as criticizing the authorities was denied participation in the island's affairs. And those who supported independence were arbitrarily imprisoned or exiled. Ramon Emeterio Betances, the preeminent Puerto Rican independentista of the second half of the century, spent as much time abroad as at home. New York, Santo Domingo, Saint Thomas: The Spanish were satisfied only when Betances and his kind were anywhere but in Puerto Rico.[12]

From his various refuges, Betances tried to start a revolution, insisting that real change had to be rooted in cultural pride and hard work. If Puerto Ricans wanted freedom, they must rely first and foremost on their own efforts. Outside sympathizers could help, but if others carried freedom's banner, how would Puerto Ricans learn to do so? Independentistas had to stand on their own feet, and if those feet were shoeless or if, like Betances, you had been born to unmarried parents, who cared? Puerto Ricans, victims of three hundred years of colonialism, had to learn to stand up against the brutality of others. Change could occur, but along with machetes, people had to carry a deep-seated pride in themselves and in their indigenous culture. Without such pride, revolution might take place, but it would merely be another import from abroad.[13]

In 1868 Betances and his many colleagues finally achieved a small measure of success by forming the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Committee. Several island towns had active branches, and using the password letters *l* and *m*—for *libertad o muerte* (liberty or death)—rebels slowly organized an attempt to violently overthrow the government. Betances, from his exile in Santo Domingo, planned to sail home with a thousand men, five hundred rifles, and six cannons. But before they sailed, one conspirator was arrested and another warned the authorities. Although Betances found his weapons embargoed, his coconspirators, aware that authorities knew their identities, decided to risk an attack rather than wait to be arrested. On a day that is called *El Grito de Lares* (the Scream of Lares) in Puerto Rican history, between four hundred and a thousand people marched into the mountain town of Lares and took it over. Unveiling a white flag displaying the words "Liberty or Death, Long Live Free Puerto Rico, Year 1868," the rebels declared Puerto Rico a republic on September 23, 1868.[14]

The Spanish reacted immediately and forcefully. They defeated the rebels at San Sebastian, killed or imprisoned any conspirator they discovered, and in the mountains hunted down the guerrilla bands who refused to give up. Within a month the revolt had been completely quashed, first by the superior forces of the crown and second by the unwillingness of the criollo elite to support either Betances's violent means or his revolutionary ends. Most of the powerful natives were not restless for immediate independence.

Why, confronted with increasingly arbitrary Spanish rule, did the criollo elite consistently put forward nothing more than a request for reform? With nation after nation seeking independence—think of Cuba's desire for independence—why did Puerto Rico fail to follow suit?

These questions dominate the large number of books on Puerto Rican politics. And if the answers vary, together they are essential for an understanding of the nation the United States would soon invade and the nationalist movement it would soon inherit. First, many Puerto Ricans adopted a cautious, pragmatic attitude toward the Spanish. They were willing to settle, not for the ideal, but for the possible. Let's take not what we should get but what we can get. The second answer is self-interest. Many members of the criollo elite owned or had interests in the island's coffee, sugar, and tobacco plantations. They profited handsomely from their ties to the Spanish markets and were not about to bite the hand that fed them. Third, many of the elite were relatively indifferent to the plight of the Puerto Rican masses. For example, many landowners supported the abolition of slavery only because higher labor costs would make it much harder for smaller farmers to compete. In such an atmosphere of callousness, few tried to build a bridge between powerful criollos and powerless jíbaros. And without that bridge, the Spanish never confronted anything more than occasional outbursts of revolutionary fervor. A fourth answer is found in the heavy influx of royalist emigrants. Their education and ancestry assured them of privilege, and their political views heavily weighted island politics toward the far right.

Finally, and arguably most important, is the issue of cultural pride. Spanish values and beliefs had thoroughly dominated Puerto Rican life for so long that many islanders, rich and poor alike, accepted the superiority of Spanish ways. Many members of the criollo elite had been educated abroad and, like so many

colonists trained in Europe, they tended to identify with their masters. In the extreme, they learned to be ashamed of their island heritage, but in general they simply accepted the superiority of European ways. They behaved like intractable Hispanophiles, and as such, they formed political parties that never seriously questioned, much less threatened, Spanish dominance.

Both formed in 1870, one of the two major parties was very conservative and one was moderate. The Incondicionales (the Unconditionals) ardently defended the status quo and thus gained the support of the Spanish governors. In 1880 the two joined forces to establish electoral laws that would have made South African whites smile with satisfaction. Of 374,640 adult Puerto Rican men eligible to vote, the new law let only 2,004 do so. The Unconditionals won every election because they alone participated in the island's version of democracy.[15]

The opposition Liberal party advocated a policy of reform and assimilation, but as if the Unconditionals didn't pose enough of a problem, the Liberals fought bitterly among themselves. One wing argued in favor of autonomy, pushing for measures like locally determined budgets and total freedom in commerce, industry, and education. The Liberals' other wing stressed assimilation, arguing that, instead of autonomy, becoming an incorporated part of Spain offered the best chance for reform.

In 1887, the autonomist wing took control of the Liberal party. Although they finally defeated their internal opposition, the party's moderate program so frightened the Unconditionals that in league with Governor Palacio Gonzalez, they orchestrated a period of systematic repression called the *Compontes* ("tortures") in Puerto Rican history. The Spanish argued that autonomists secretly supported independence and that their so-called moderation was a cover for their concealed radicalism. Once Palacio and his henchmen had rounded up enough of the autonomists, they used torture to obtain evidence of sedition. With chains and lashes, they flogged those arrested until they got conspiracy confessions, which led to arrests of the Liberal party's leadership. Threats of execution by firing squad proved to be a bluff, but with its leadership jailed and many of its members frightened into submission, it would be years before the Liberal party was able to reestablish meaningful opposition. And in the meantime, they continued to quarrel among themselves. Eventually the infighting stopped, and in 1891 the Autonomists aligned themselves with the Spanish Liberal party.

Thanks to Cuban independence efforts, the Spanish government finally saw the light. Afraid they would lose everything, Spain informed Puerto Ricans they were autonomous on November 9, 1897. The island would have nineteen representatives in the Spanish Cortes, the franchise was extended to a large portion of the male population, and Puerto Ricans finally had a good measure of control over local affairs. Ultimate power rested with the appointed governor, and thus with the Spanish crown, but a majority of the Senate and all members of the House of Representatives were locally elected.[16]

Autonomists were delighted. After three hundred years of Spanish rule, Puerto Rico had finally achieved a measure of independence from colonial rule. No one knew exactly where the autonomic charter would lead, but with the Puerto Rican legislators slated to take office in May 1898, liberals looked forward to a new Puerto Rico. Natives had power, and if they would use moderate means and exercise patience, they might slowly extract more and more concessions from their increasingly weak colonial masters. At the very least, Spain had publicly recognized Puerto Rico's right to control and manage its own affairs.

And then there was the Spanish-American war. The United States invaded Puerto Rico on July 25, 1898, eight days after the legislature was due to begin its deliberations, and the autonomic charter never had a chance to breathe life into island politics. Guns and soldiers replaced deliberations, as Puerto Rico, four hundred years into colonialism, began the new century with a new ruler. This one spoke like a democrat but acted like an autocrat. Although the United States promised freedom, it took two years for martial law to be abolished, and then Puerto Ricans got less from the Americans than they had had from the Spanish.

La lucha, halted by war, began again after the Spanish and Americans had settled Puerto Rico's fate in France. Somehow, in a world that had abolished slavery, trading nations was still an acceptable practice. Owning one person made you a scoundrel; owning a nation made you a colonial benefactor, and a big power to boot.

LITTLE PUERTO RICO

About fifteen minutes into the interview, both of us caught the irony. I was sitting in a maximum security prison openly discussing the freedom of the Puerto Rican people with Wells Fargo

defendant Juan Enrique Segarra. Here we were in a country that often practices what it preaches—otherwise why let a writer in to talk for hours with "terrorists"—discussing the colonial policies of successive American presidents.

"You couldn't do an interview like that in Russia," a colleague later told me, and he was probably right. But then again, so many other nations make no bones about their repressive or dictatorial policies. When, as in El Salvador, the bodies of dissidents line the streets, no one expects much. Or when, as in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas forcibly move thousands of Mesquito Indians, it's clear that the end justifies the means. Whatever it takes, the rulers will rule.

The United States is different. With documents such as the Declaration of Independence and symbols such as the Statue of Liberty we proudly and tirelessly proclaim our commitment to political freedom. As General Nelson Appleton Miles told the Puerto Rican people immediately after his successful seizure of the island, "We have not come to make war upon the people of a country that for centuries has been oppressed . . . but to bestow upon you the immunities and blessings of the liberal institutions of our government."

If the general hadn't been American, he might have simply conquered the island and kept quiet. But as he spoke the noble words that promised an end to centuries of Spanish oppression, he was preparing to establish martial law. Puerto Ricans were free, as long as they precisely followed the orders of Miles's gun-toting soldiers. The contradiction is a prime source of the anger that fills the hearts of so many Puerto Rican nationalists. Americans promised one thing and delivered another, and because of the canyon that separated words and actions, nationalists judge Americans far more harshly than they do the Spanish.

"It's a crime against humanity," said Juan Segarra, as we set out to discuss the Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, which first gave Americans the authority to place a nationalist like Juan in a cell two thousand miles from his home.

Plenipotentiary is a grandiose word with a simple meaning. Plenipotentiaries decide the fate of nations. They are the high-hat-and-tails diplomats who, invested with full power to make treaties, can actually take or give away an entire nation, including its men, women, and children.

Plenipotentiaries make history. On February 11, 1899, Whitelaw Reid told friends how, as an American plenipotentiary, he and his colleagues had settled things with the Spanish. First, despite "the most earnest Spanish efforts," we had refused to accept control of Cuba. As promised, the Cubans got their independence free of the debts incurred by their former masters. Second, we "had dealt liberally with a fallen foe," giving him money—$20 million—rather than taking money from him. Nevertheless, even though "this was not a war for any material interest," the United States had spent more than $240 million—"without counting the pensions that might still accrue"—so we had a right to ask, "where was the indemnity which under such circumstances it is the duty of the victorious nation to exact, not only in its own interest but in the interest of a Christian civilization?"[17]

The United States had to make the Spanish feel their loss of the war. Because Spain had no cash left, as Whitelaw Reid put it, "No indemnity was possible, save in territory." We thought of taking Cuba, but "desolated by twelve years of war," the country wasn't worth much. That left Puerto Rico, an island "immeasurably less important to us," eight hundred miles from our coast and only one-twelfth the size of Cuba. "Were the representatives of the United States, charged with the duty of protecting not only its honor but its interests . . . to content themselves with little Puerto Rico . . . plus the petty reef of Guam as indemnity for an unprovoked war that had cost and was to cost their country $300 million?"

Never! We demanded the Philippines as well, and as a diplomatic face-saver, we gave the Spanish $20 million for "our new possessions." Only time would tell if it was a good deal, but critics had to remember America's difficult position. Since war had stripped the Spanish clean, we took what we could get. Even an island as "little" as Puerto Rico.[18]

On April 11, 1899, President William McKinley presided over a ceremony that completed, as if it were a real estate closing, the deal between the United States and Spain. Sitting in the reception room of the White House and flanked by prominent members of his Cabinet, McKinley waited for the French ambassador to arrive. Since the Spanish couldn't or wouldn't come, the French would act on their behalf. Shortly after 3 P.M., Ambassador Jules Chambon appeared. He and McKinley exchanged for-

mal greetings and chatted. At precisely 3:28 P.M., the two readied themselves for the final act of this diplomatic drama. McKinley reached into his desk and as reported in *The Tribune* handed Chambon "the American copy of the treaty, handsomely embossed, bound in dark blue morocco and incased in a black morocco portfolio." Chambon, not to be outdone, handed McKinley the Spanish copy of the treaty, "also embossed, bound in morocco, and incased in a maroon colored morocco box." The meeting ended with deferential bows, the bestowing of souvenirs on the Americans, and the presentation of an expensive leather portfolio for the Spanish archives. A few days later, American officials handed over, again to the French, four bank drafts for $5 million each.[19]

America now owned Puerto Rico. The island was, quite literally, a prize of war, and to nationalists like Victor Gerena, born many years later, it was a prize no Puerto Rican had authorized the French to give to the Americans on behalf of the Spanish. Then and now, in the eyes of independentistas, the Treaty of Paris was an act, not of peace, but of war.

Whitelaw Reid's treaty was unquestionably a first in American history. Before Reid and his colleagues, no American had accepted territory without giving in return the twin promises of citizenship and statehood. When Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the treaty stipulated that the inhabitants be incorporated into "the Union of the United States" as soon as possible. Right through the annexations of Alaska and Hawaii in 1898, the United States always made actual or implied promises of statehood and citizenship.

Puerto Rico was different. Nobody had made any promises, so when Congress finally got around to deciding Puerto Rico's future, representatives didn't know if it was constitutional to make up new rules as they went along. For example, the United States treated Puerto Rico like a foreign country. Senator Henry Moore Teller of Colorado complained to his colleagues on March 2, 1900, that although the United States seems to be inclined to make the island a part of the nation, "yet we have the very remarkable condition that when we export anything to that country we must pay duty on it and when they export anything to this country they must pay duty on it." Was Puerto Rico a part of the United States or not? Teller saw "no reason why the United States may not have a colony." But Senator Teller wondered whether this

situation would be contradictory. "Are we going to have a section of the country where there are citizens . . . and yet we treat them as foreigners? That is an inconsistency which the American people will never tolerate. We are brought squarely to the issue. What are we going to do with these people?"[20]

That was an embarrassing question under any circumstances. It produced especially red faces in 1900 because the island came up first on the colonial agenda before Congress, and senators refused to give rights to Puerto Ricans that might later be claimed by Filipinos. It was hard enough to consider the "childlike" Puerto Ricans fit candidates for statehood, but the thought of Asiatics, those "mongrels of the East," as Senator William B. Bate of Tennessee put it, becoming American citizens frightened so many senators that, yet again, Puerto Rico became a pawn in somebody else's chess game. Debating what to do with these people, congressmen consistently focused, first, on the extent of their authority, and, second, on their need to use Puerto Ricans as a barrier to the infiltration of mongrel citizens and the infiltration of goods produced by cheap mongrel labor.

On the issue of authority, Congress acted like an absolute monarch. Senator Joseph P. Foraker, author of the legislation that would rule Puerto Rico until 1917, told his colleagues, "We understand that the effect of the treaty was to put the United States into possession of Puerto Rico. We do not understand it was intended or expected to make them a State or to do that which entitled them to be called even a Territory. We understand that what has been done makes them a dependency or a possession of the United States and that we have a right to legislate to them as we may see fit."

Even for a Congress with visions of imperial power, Foraker's assertion seemed particularly bold. Because as nationalists understandably note, what about the Puerto Ricans? Were they zeroes, who counted only if Congress said so? Apparently so, since Foraker and his colleagues openly argued that the treaty "invests Congress with plenary power to do in this matter as Congress may see fit. We may make them citizens or we may deny to them citizenship, and we may so legislate as we may see fit with respect to taxes or with respect to anything else that determines the rights or duties of the inhabitants of that island for all that affects their civil and political status."[21]

Few things anger a Puerto Rican nationalist more than the

(quite representative) assertions made by a senator like Foraker. Americans brag about their respect for human rights, yet they refuse to remember that the lawmakers of the United States established a political situation in which Puerto Ricans had rights only if Congress said so. For today's nationalists, yesterday's history establishes their right to question all manifestations of American authority. As defendant Juan Segarra suggested, citing a lesson he learned at Harvard, "doesn't subservience to unjust laws or government policies invite totalitarianism?" And if the congressional use of Puerto Rico as a shield against the Asiatic hordes wasn't unjust, what is?

In the first legislation introduced in Congress in 1900, Puerto Ricans might have immediately become American citizens. Whether they would have had all the rights normally granted to citizens no one would know, because the McKinley administration had the first legislation withdrawn. Fearing that the citizenship precedent would be cited by the Filipinos, new legislation —later called the Foraker Act—let Puerto Ricans remain citizens of their own country. Although they still, as Foraker noted, "belonged to the United States of America," eliminating the citizenship provision made it clear that Congress never intended to put Puerto Rico "in a state of pupilage for statehood."[22]

Islanders became an unincorporated part of the United States, as subjects. That situation made the Constitution applicable to some extent on the island but records of congressional debates show that members of Congress frequently expressed uncertainty about whether their actions would be seen as legal by the Supreme Court. Would the justices put their seal of approval on this unprecedented legislation? Or would they label bills like the Foraker Act unconstitutional?

Congress tried to tread easy, especially when it came to the issue of raising revenue for the depressed Puerto Rican economy. In 1900, many prominent Americans agreed that the United States was responsible for Puerto Rico's desperate economic situation. As Secretary of War Elihu Root told the nation in his annual report for 1900, "The principal difficulty now in the island of Puerto Rico is that the transfer of the island from Spain to the United States has not resulted in an increase of prosperity, but in the reverse."[23]

This is what had happened. Until invasion by the United States, Puerto Rico had had open markets for its first and third

largest exports, coffee and tobacco, respectively. Spain and Cuba had eagerly bought these products because, especially in Europe, many consumers relished Puerto Rican coffee above all others. But with the war over and Puerto Rico no longer a Spanish colony, Cuba and Spain had imposed stiff tariffs on the island's major source of wealth. Literally overnight, Puerto Rico's coffee and tobacco were no longer competitive on European markets. Coffee and tobacco crops rotted away on the docks and in storehouses all over Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, the United States retained its traditional duties on Puerto Rican exports and imports, with the result that it was no more competitive in the States than in Spain or Cuba.

With no money coming in, Puerto Ricans suddenly had to pay more for Spanish imports, and they were granted no reduction of duties for those from the United States. As if in a conspiracy, both the past and the present colonial master waged economic war on the Puerto Rican people. It was not hyperbole when Senator Foraker told his colleagues that Puerto Rico "so far as its industries are concerned is prostrated; all its industrial conditions are paralyzed and have been ever since we took possession."[24]

Foraker proposed this remedy: Since America already taxed the islanders' mainland and foreign trade in both directions, let the money derived from duties on imports and exports revert back to Puerto Rico: Let Americans collect the cash, but give back to the island every cent (minus the cost of collection) obtained from trade between the mainland and its new possession. With this neat idea, Foraker hoped to make the prostrate island somewhat self-sufficient. In any event, the plan offered an alternative "to our practicing paternalism to the extent of feeding them from day to day out of our public Treasury."[25]

Although many congressmen quickly accepted Foraker's suggestion, others would do so only if the Foraker bill clearly indicated that Puerto Ricans were not American citizens. Since the Constitution mandates uniform taxation of our people, if islanders should become Americans, there would be an obvious contradiction. For Foraker this objection posed no problem—remember the Filipinos—so the original legislation for the island (still in force in 1985) raised revenue by returning the duties collected on trade between the United States and Puerto Rico.

In Foraker's view, the island was saved from American paternalism, but for nationalists who read this history, the tortured

reasoning of Congress is only one more example of blind self-righteousness. Although the Secretary of War had publicly admitted that islanders were worse off under American control, Congress "helped" its new possession by marrying the two economies: the greater the trade, which had to be carried on American ships, the larger the return to Puerto Rico's treasury. And all the while, Puerto Ricans were supposed to be grateful when Congress said that one reason they couldn't be citizens was that, except for tariff money, congressmen couldn't think of any way to repair the damage caused by the American takeover.

It was a heady period for Congress. The attention of the nation was on the United States as a world power, and the injustices dealt to Puerto Ricans generally escaped notice. Islanders understood that, like a tree in a hurricane, they had been indifferently tossed about by the "necessities" of power politics, while in the United States, officials perceived only the responsibilities that came with national greatness. Secretary Root said the Puerto Ricans "would inevitably fail without a course of tuition under a strong and guiding hand," and when President McKinley signed the Foraker Act on April 12, 1900, Puerto Ricans got the course work Root suggested. For as long as the United States deemed it necessary, the President would appoint the governor, the members of the upper house, and the justices of the island's Supreme Court. All meaningful power would rest in American hands, and if this legislation successfully sent a message to the Filipinos, one of the great ironies in this story is that while the United States accepted Philippine independence in 1946, the Puerto Ricans are still waiting to complete their course of study.[26]

Once the Foraker bill became law, many island politicians changed course. Expecting either a quick or a moderate assimilation into American life, they got instead the "never-never land" status of an unincorporated territory. In 1904 the Unionist Party, which was dominant until 1920, added something new to its platform: independence as an acceptable, definitive status. Unionists would also consider statehood or self-rule under the American flag, but they refused to live, as the American Chief Justice Melville W. Fuller put it, "like a disembodied shade in an intermediate state of ambiguous existence."[27]

In addition to a definitive answer to the status question, Unionists also demanded immediate greater control of the island's government. Since each of their requests was refused or

ignored, island politicians decided to precipitate a crisis. It occurred in 1909 and produced such a sharp rebuke from President William Howard Taft that, almost overnight, many moderate Puerto Ricans turned into ardent independentistas.

Although the Foraker Act left ultimate power in the hands of Congress, Puerto Rico's House of Delegates nevertheless approved most legislation relating to local affairs. Although this was the appearance rather than the substance of power, in 1909 island politicians used appearances to make an important point. Complaining of "the unjust organic law which makes it impossible for the people's representatives to pass the laws they desire," the House of Delegates refused to approve the next year's budget. That meant that the matter went to Washington, which was exactly what the Unionists wanted. If Congress had to air Puerto Rico's complaints, maybe change would occur. Nothing else had worked, "so opinion in the island was solidly behind the House of Delegates and their rebellion against the system."[28]

In Washington, President Taft was astonished. He not only blamed the whole crisis "on the selfish and capricious" actions of Puerto Rican politicians, he used the dispute to question the wisdom of American policies. Perhaps the United States had been too generous? Here was Puerto Rico, America's "favored daughter," complaining about Daddy's generosity. Hadn't the United States brought substantial road, sanitation, and educational improvements? The island was enjoying unprecedented prosperity, yet all the Puerto Ricans did was complain about the absence of democratic rights. In Taft's view, the budget dispute showed that "we have gone somewhat too fast in the extension of political power to them for their own good." Puerto Ricans didn't understand how to be democrats because, as Congressman John Kennedy of Oklahoma reminded Taft, you couldn't expect too much from people with large quantities of Spanish blood in their veins. Why, the Spanish had added nothing to human knowledge except the thumbscrew.[29]

Taft told the Puerto Ricans to forget it. For next year's budget they would get last year's appropriation, and if they wanted more power to run the island, they first had to show themselves to be worthy. If they would keep quiet, the United States might eventually grant modest improvements in the Foraker Act.

With Taft's lecture on the record, many moderate Puerto Ricans embraced the cause of independence. They saw no future

in an alliance with people who treated them like children. In Washington, politicians saw the agitation for independence as further evidence of Puerto Rican ingratitude and irresponsibility. These people needed more help than even McKinley and Elihu Root had thought necessary.

The crisis, begun as a way to increase understanding, produced its opposite. Americans had their worst prejudices confirmed, while many Puerto Ricans became increasingly disillusioned with the men from Washington. Indeed, after incidents like the budget battle, anti-Americanism became an institutionalized attitude. Presidents like Taft failed to perceive the predictable consequences of colonialism. Although it denied power to the House of Delegates, the Foraker Act did give islanders a forum in which to voice their grievances. Since they had free speech but no real control over their destinies, island politicians continually faulted the policies of the United States. Meanwhile, no matter how genuine the grievances, men like Taft reacted by labeling those who exploit them as "troublemakers whose factious conduct is a constant proof they lack responsibility."[30]

With the Puerto Ricans, Americans had become involved in what Raymond Carr called "the vicious circle of colonialism." As long as the status issue remained unresolved, Puerto Rican politics would be rooted in muted or open criticism of the United States, and, as long as American presidents shared Taft's perspective, the battles would continue to produce, first, American charges of ingratitude, second, a solid basis for the Puerto Rican nationalism of the 1930s, and, third, a strong justification for the $7 million Wells Fargo "expropriation."

By 1928, the Jones Act, passed in 1917, replaced Foraker's legislation. Besides being American citizens, Puerto Ricans elected their Senate as well as their House. They had two places to practice free speech but still no meaningful control of major political or economic affairs. According to the United States Supreme Court, Puerto Rican Americans did have constitutional rights but not on the island of Puerto Rico. Apparently "locality" determined the application of the Constitution, and since Puerto Rico was an unincorporated territory, islanders could claim only those constitutional rights deemed by American jurists to be fundamental. In the case that moved the Court to produce this ruling, a man named Balzac was denied his request for a jury trial because his citizenship rights did not apply on the island.

More obviously than ever, Puerto Ricans were "sort of" Americans who "sort of" controlled some aspects of local government. Even the statehooders had deep resentments. When Charles Lindbergh flew down to the island on February 3, 1928, the speaker of the Puerto Rican House, a moderate named José Tous Soto, gave Lindbergh a message for Calvin Coolidge: "Grant us the freedom that you enjoy, for which you struggled, which you worship, which we deserve, and which you have promised us. We ask the right to a place in the sun of this land of ours, brightened by the stars of your glorious flag."[31]

Tous Soto proudly claimed to be an autonomist. He sought, not independence, but an association that would grant islanders control of local affairs. To Coolidge, who might have been in contact with Taft, who had become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1921, the moderate request seemed like a stinging rebuke of American society. "Silent Cal" had a temper, especially when people criticized Yankees or their actions.

In a public reply, Coolidge said the United States owed nothing to the Puerto Ricans. "The Treaty of Paris, of course, contains no promise to the people of Puerto Rico. No phrase of that treaty contemplated the extension to Puerto Rico of a more liberal regime than existed." But Americans had given the islanders a democratic form of government, and instead of offering thanks, local politicians complained that the island is a "mere subjected colony." "Certainly giving Puerto Rico greater liberty than it has ever enjoyed and powers of government for the exercise of which its people are barely prepared cannot, with propriety, be said to be establishing therein a mere subjected colony. . . .

"We found the people of Puerto Rico poor and distressed, without hope for the future, ignorant, poverty stricken, and diseased." Now, thanks largely "to the encouragement of American assistance," Puerto Rico has hope, underwritten by American money. Islanders pay no taxes (Coolidge ignored their lack of representation in Congress), and they get back the duties collected on imports and exports. (Coolidge ignored or was unaware of the rationale for returning this money to the islanders.) What more could Americans do, except caution native politicians to make reasonable demands, "rather than be isolated from the source from which they have received practically their only hope of progress."[32]

Once again both parties were caught in the vicious circle of

colonialism. Islanders could cite one legitimate grievance after another (such as the fact that American teachers were paid with Puerto Rican money to teach Spanish-speaking children how to read and write in English), but as in 1909, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Coolidge expected gratitude, even moderates like Tous Soto answered with criticism, and the battle continued. Nothing changed except that, after thirty years of American rule, a new generation of Puerto Rican activists refused to do battle with words. They used guns, and like Los Macheteros today, they raised the issues that will disappear under only one condition: a definitive political status for the Puerto Rican people.

Pedro Albizu Campos was born near Ponce on September 12, 1891. His father was Basque, his mother of Indian, Spanish, and African descent. Few people had a better right to be called a Puerto Rican, and nobody used his heritage more aggressively than this small, frail-looking fire eater. He stood about 5'4" tall and invariably wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a black bow tie. Albizu had alert eyes and prominent cheekbones that proudly announced his Indian and Basque ancestry and perfectly defined his political personality.

Albizu Campos was cheeky. He stood up to anyone who got in the way of independence with so much ferocity that even critics occasionally praised what his biographer Federico Ribes Tovar calls his "sense of the absolute." At a political rally in Ponce in 1925, the platform displayed a Puerto Rican flag and lodged in the handrail were a few small copies of the Stars and Stripes. When he mounted the platform to speak, Albizu stuffed every American flag into his pocket. With the only political symbol he had ever recognized behind him, Albizu told his listeners why they had to be independent.

To appreciate the contemporary significance of this gesture, remember what other "radicals" did. Luis Muñoz Marin, later to be governor of the island, refused in the 1920s to speak on a platform that lacked a Puerto Rican flag because "we had agreed among ourselves not to speak from any platform unless the traditional regional Puerto Rican flag was on the platform as well as the American flag as a symbol of equality."[33]

For Albizu the equality issue never arose. Nothing equaled Puerto Rico's red, white, and blue banner; and nothing, absolutely nothing, was more important than the immediate independence of the Puerto Rican people.

Armed with a Harvard law degree, Albizu initially tried to work within the political system. In 1930 he became president of the Nationalist Party, and in 1932 his organization participated in the island's elections. But despite the depression and a strong wave of anti-Americanism, the Nationalists came in last, and if voter fear of retribution partially explains the weak support for the independentistas, another factor was Albizu's ideology. He had an approach that was thoroughly distant from the economic and social problems of the Puerto Rican masses.

Consider his "concept of race." Albizu argued that "Spain was the mother of modern civilization." Throwing herself into the discovery of new lands, Spain not only gave the world its "geographic wholeness" but opened the road for all contemporary investigation in the philosophical and natural sciences. It was the Spanish who had achieved primacy in Europe. Virtue, courage, honor, sacrifice, scorn for death: These were the Spanish traits that enabled Puerto Ricans to claim and demand independence. Because, "for our race, danger never existed."[34]

To a people mired in poverty and absentee exploitation, Albizu's outlook seemed as distant as the Spanish mainland. He tried to use Spain to inject a much-needed dose of pride into his people. And he succeeded. But like the American black activist Malcolm X, Albizu won converts not so much by the appeal of his ideology as by the way he tied his cheeky self-confidence to the hardened resentments of the Puerto Rican people.

Islanders used Albizu. Some called him a fanatic, but as the date of Victor Gerena's "expropriation" showed, he is lovingly remembered as the one man who continually told the Americans to go to hell. Many Puerto Ricans have vicariously lived out their resentments through the forceful personality of a man destined to spend most of his adult life in federal penitentiaries.[35]

The first serious trouble occurred on October 24, 1935. Albizu had criticized University of Puerto Rico students because they had failed to take a leading role in the fight for independence. The boys were effeminate, the girls drunkards who partied while Puerto Rico waited to be free. Angered by Albizu's comments, students organized a protest against his brand of nationalism, while police, fearing trouble, helped create it. When five nationalists arrived at the university, they were first refused entry and

then told to drive to police headquarters. With officers on the car's running boards, the trip began quietly, but before it ended one policeman was wounded and the five nationalists were killed by police bullets.

Albizu was incensed. At the nationalists' burial, he told his listeners that the American governor and Col. Francis Riggs, the chief of police, had sent the officers "with the deliberate purpose of murdering the nationalist representation of Puerto Rico." Albizu suggested that for every nationalist killed, an American should lose his life. Repression would stop only when the colonialists understood that Puerto Ricans had read the Bible: An eye for an eye and an American for every nationalist murdered in la lucha.[36]

This approach is very similar to the one taken by groups like the FALN or Los Macheteros. But, in contrast to the relatively calm rhetoric of today's police, Col. Riggs answered Albizu's challenge with one of his own, telling a reporter "there would be war to the death against all Puerto Ricans."[37] The newspapers quickly publicized the provocative statement, and on February 23, 1936, friends of the five murdered nationalists assassinated Riggs. He died at once, and so did the nationalists who shot him. Taken into custody, Hiram Rosado and Elias Beauchamp were first beaten and then, within an hour of their capture, murdered by the police.

Revenge begat revenge. At the funeral of the two nationalists, Albizu Campos said, "The lie has been given to the phrase that Puerto Ricans, taken collectively, are cowards." That statement "is a legend a corrupt leadership has brought us to justify their trafficking with the life of the nation . . . The Yankee regime is doing us a supreme favor. The Yankees seek to intimidate us with murder. They can kill Albizu Campos. It will solve nothing . . . The best and quickest way to create a nationalistic country in twenty-four hours is to continue that school of murder. Nationalism will not attack from ambush, but face-to-face, face to eternity."[38]

Albizu wanted a revolution, but the United States tried to prevent one by holding the next face-off, not in the streets but in the courts. On March 7, 1936, federal authorities raided nationalist headquarters, collected "compromising evidence," and collected Albizu Campos and seven of his closest colleagues as well. The charge was sedition; the penalty, upon conviction, was a long stretch in a mainland—never Puerto Rican—prison.

For nationalists, sedition was an "impossible crime," but federal authorities felt that it offered the best chance of a conviction. Lacking the evidence to prove a murder or even an incitement-to-murder charge, American officials went with what they had. And in Albizu's first trial, jurors said the prosecutors came up short. Since eight Americans and four Puerto Ricans failed to reach a consensus, the first trial ended in a hung jury.

In the second trial, federal officials took no chances. They stacked the jury with twelve safe people. Ten were Americans, two were Puerto Ricans,* and together they produced a verdict that federal prosecutors found "satisfactory"; officials believed the two-to-ten-year sentences of Albizu and his colleagues "ought to go far to restore order and tranquility."[39]

Exactly the opposite occurred. Indeed, after the Federal Court of Appeals upheld Albizu's conviction in February 1937, Puerto Rico witnessed what is quite accurately called a massacre of nationalist supporters. To show solidarity with Albizu, his followers had planned a parade in Ponce. They obtained the mayor's approval, but at the last minute local authorities, under orders from San Juan, revoked the permit. The nationalists decided to march anyway—many people had come from all over the island—and, wearing the black blouses that symbolized national mourning for Puerto Rico's colonial status, marchers began to assemble in front of their local headquarters. Meanwhile, the heavily armed police had blocked off every street in the vicinity. They still planned to march when suddenly, nobody knows from which side, a shot rang out. Within minutes twenty civilians, some just bystanders, had been killed and more than 150 wounded. Authorities tried to blame the nationalists, but an exhaustive analysis by the American Civil Liberties Union came to this conclusion: "The facts show that the affair of March 21, 1937, in Ponce was a massacre . . . due to the denial by the police of the civil rights of citizens to parade and assemble. This denial was ordered by the Governor of Puerto Rico."[40]

Like Dar Jassein for the Arabs, the Ponce Massacre symbolized for nationalists the brutal and ruthless use of force by their oppressors. Only threats of violence kept the colonialists in power and only revenge would give Puerto Ricans the wherewithal to resist. In June 1937, two nationalists tried to kill the federal judge who presided at Albizu's trial; during a rally at

*Even the composition of the first jury was highly suspect because Puerto Rico had two million native residents and five thousand American residents.

which Puerto Rico's resident commissioner defended the use of the American flag, two nationalists tried to kill him. And on July 25, 1938, at a parade celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the American takeover, Albizu's followers tried to assassinate Governor Blanton Winship by firing more than eighty shots at the reviewing stand. Somehow Winship escaped injury but his bodyguard was wounded and a colonel in the National Guard killed by a stray bullet.

With the attempt on Winship, one long cycle of violence came to an end. But in hindsight, it is also possible to see in that event both the beginning of new and the continuation of old patterns in Puerto Rican–American relations. In terms of a new beginning, Puerto Rico now had a national hero who openly advocated violent resistance to American colonialism. Albizu is the spiritual father of Los Macheteros, and no matter how strongly they may reject ideas of his like the "concept of race," all nationalists remember the history of the 1930s and teach it to their children.

In terms of the old aspects of the story, both sides continued to play politics within the boundaries set by Yankee colonialism. Presidents still appointed Americans to govern Puerto Ricans, islanders still had no meaningful control of political and economic affairs, and Puerto Rico's mainstream politicians still developed proposals that were a critical reaction to, rather than independent of, American policies. Right after Col. Riggs's assassination, Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland introduced an independence bill into the United States Senate. If Puerto Ricans voted to be free, Tydings proposed to make the island a sovereign nation four years after the vote took place. To some islanders, this plan seemed like a good idea, but criticism understandably occurred because Tydings had introduced the bill without consulting Puerto Ricans, who could have told him that the four-year road to independence promised economic ruin. Since roughly 90 percent of the island's trade was with the United States, phasing out the revenues from the tariffs in only four years left no time to develop new trading partners or new products to offer those partners. Puerto Rico would be free only to embrace even more poverty.

Reaction to the Tydings bill ultimately became so intense that it split the island's Liberal party. Those who stayed supported the proposal; those who left supported independence but not right now. In the opinion of Puerto Rico's premier politician, Luis

Muñoz Marin, one could not artificially separate politics and economics. Married to the American economy, Puerto Ricans should seek a political divorce only when they had the ability to support themselves. That made sense, but what happened if, while waiting for the right time to split, the dissatisfied partner became even more dependent on its colonial master? A divorce might never occur because Puerto Ricans would never be independent enough to make it on their own. Meanwhile, without fundamental control of their political destiny, islanders would continue to criticize the United States for its political suppression of the Puerto Rican people.[41]

What was the right timing for the split? That question defined Puerto Rican politics in the 1940s and continues to fuel island politics in the 1980s. Everybody compromised when the Free Associated State, or Commonwealth was created in 1952. Instead of resolving basic issues, the new arrangements guaranteed only one thing: The United States would be criticized for its political and economic exploitation of the Puerto Rican people.

FREE ASSOCIATED STATE

By 1948, Luis Muñoz Marin, leader of the Popular Democratic party, controlled Puerto Rican politics. His Populares demolished the opposition, winning more than 65 percent of the vote in 1944, and even if it was true that "at least 80 percent of the Populares supported independence,"[42] most refused to contest the personal power of Muñoz Marin. Call it charisma ("He could sell ice cream to an eskimo," one person told me), call it *personalismo*, call it vested interest. Whatever the factors, Muñoz's policies determined the politics of the Populares.

On July 4, 1948, during the first campaign in which Puerto Ricans were to elect their own governor, Muñoz Marin personally made a dramatic appeal to the island's electorate. Because "all of us, absolutely all of us, wish that this obsolete system which we call colonialism was dead," and because "the form of political relationship in which the United States holds Puerto Rico is unjust and unintelligent," Muñoz asked islanders to authorize a commission that would, first, draft a constitution, and, second, schedule a plebiscite to decide for statehood or independence. Naturally, the United States Congress had to approve Muñoz's suggestions, and no final vote would occur until the economic

situation seemed feasible, but Muñoz nevertheless linked the new constitution to a final determination of the status issue: "I am going to ask the people of the United States, if the people of Puerto Rico allow it with their votes, to establish this high precedent: to finish in the world the liquidation of the colonial system which began to be liquidated on the Fourth of July, 1776."

The end was in sight. After 450 years, Puerto Ricans would be in control, an idea that so appealed to voters that Muñoz and his Populares demolished the opposition. They got more than 70 percent of the votes cast, while the statehooders (with 16 percent) and the independentistas (with 12 percent) split the rest.[43]

When he went to Washington, Muñoz could legitimately argue that Puerto Ricans had said yes: They wanted a final solution to the status question. The rest was up to Congress.

But Congress had absolutely no intention of letting Puerto Rico go. That the United States wanted to retain its colony was made clear to Muñoz on his frequent trips to Washington, and in the end he settled for what Congress agreed to give. Testifying before the House in March 1950, Muñoz repeatedly told congressmen they had no cause for concern. The constitution that he and his party proposed for Puerto Rico guaranteed nothing but "local self-government. The whole government structure would be subject to what the United States Constitution provides," and the pleas for a constitution did not mask a desire that Puerto Rico become a state. Puerto Ricans did not plan to enter the Union through the back door of a local constitution. They wanted control of island affairs, and Congress could rest assured "that we haven't any idea of coming in within a year or ten years or I don't know when we will ever come in and ask for statehood. Unless we have very, very long lives, none of us on this committee would be here when that time does arrive."[44]

A status of neither fish nor fowl—neither independent country nor state—apparently satisfied Muñoz, but on the island controversy continued. *El Mundo* said, "It is confusion to try to interpret the last elections [of 1948] as if all those who voted for Muñoz Marin voted at the same time to postpone until the next generation the case of the political status . . . It is time to end the juggling and double play with the future of the country. If we want the Congress to treat us on a level of equality and to respect our dignity, let us talk to it like a mature country who knows what it wants and not as a vacillating kid who wants to eat his cake and have it."

El Imparcial, also a mainstream newspaper, told its readers, "We do not want intermediate solutions . . . The constitution is only a new colonial modality. The people do not want a little more liberty. They want full liberty. They want the problem to be solved in its essence, either with complete independence or with statehood."[45]

As moderates talked, nationalists acted. Albizu Campos was back on the island after ten years in prison. Still driven by the dream of independence and worried that Muñoz's deals promised a permanent association with the United States, Albizu told his followers that "the Nationalist Party is going to dynamite America and expel the Yankees from Puerto Rico . . . The day always comes when justice arms the weak and puts the giants to flight. Then another *Te Deum* shall be sung . . . but it will be preceded by armed struggle."[46]

On October 30, 1950, a group of approximately two thousand nationalists orchestrated uprisings throughout the island. Although in some instances the fighting produced nothing more than isolated gun battles, in the mountains, nationalists not only took over the town of Jayuya, they used it as a temporary capital for the sovereign republic of Puerto Rico. Authorities immediately called out the Air Force, and after hours of fierce fighting, Jayuya was once again a part of colonial Puerto Rico. However, in San Juan, Muñoz was lucky to be alive. Armed with machine guns and Molotov cocktails, five nationalists had entered La Fortaleza, the governor's residence, intent upon killing him and blowing up the structure that had always been a potent symbol of colonialism. The attempt ended in the nationalists' deaths.

Two days after the attack on La Fortaleza, two New York nationalists—Oscar Collazo and Grisilio Torresola—took a train to Washington. They meant to kill President Truman, but when they spotted guards at the entrance to Blair House (Truman's temporary residence), Collazo opened fire, and within seconds, Torresola and a police officer were dead. Examining Torresola's body, police found letters from Albizu Campos. Although they said nothing explicit about an assassination, the letters were certainly suggestive, and along with the violence on the island, they led to Albizu's arrest and imprisonment. He returned to jail, and islanders returned to a peaceful consideration of the 1948 Commonwealth proposal.

Muñoz had seen Commonwealth status as an interim one in 1948. By 1952, it had become in his eyes a "new alternative, equal

in dignity although different in nature, to independence or federated statehood." At home, Muñoz represented Commonwealth status as everything Puerto Ricans needed or wanted, but in Washington, senators put Muñoz in his colonial place. Asked if the proposed constitution would alter Congress's power over Puerto Rico, the Senate's legal advisers stressed that "nothing you [senators] are doing here weakens or breaches the full powers of Congress; the alteration in the situation is not in the powers of Congress, it is not actually in any very important change that will occur . . . It is in the fact that we now recognize the right of the Puerto Rican people to write the laws under which they are to be locally governed." Senator Joseph Mahoney stated that "if the people of Puerto Rico should step outside, if any attempt should be made to change the Constitution . . . the authority of the Congress of the United States, under the Constitution, could not be impaired or reduced."[47]

Congress ran the colonies. And to assert its powers, senators made Muñoz and his colleagues rewrite their constitution before submitting it to the Puerto Rican people. A human rights clause, guaranteeing "the right of every person to obtain work," had to be erased; Congress deleted another section on compulsory school attendance; and senators objected to the use of the word democracy, since the federal Constitution demanded a republican form of government from each of the states. Even after Muñoz reluctantly but obediently made the changes, Congress wasn't finished. The Senate report on Puerto Rico's constitution carried a warning that could not be misinterpreted: "Any act of the Puerto Rican legislature in conflict with the Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act [the act declaring Puerto Rico a Commonwealth] or the requirement of the Constitution of Puerto Rico as set forth in Public Law 600 or the Constitution of the United States would be null and void."[48]

Congress had spoken, and quite clearly. But Muñoz never publicly admitted the Commonwealth's sharp and narrow limitations. Despite the right to make their own laws, Puerto Ricans had no control over tariffs, currency, shipping, and internal and external navigation; they were unable to control immigration, air space, treaties, or patents; and they were American citizens, subject to military service but without any vote in the Congress that ultimately and openly controlled the island's destiny.[49]

Not much had changed. But Muñoz, ever the compromiser,

took what Congress offered. Without the United States, the economy would collapse, and even if it didn't, Congress had no intention of letting Puerto Rico go. Albizu could fight, but Muñoz gave in, and so did the Puerto Rican electorate. It is true that nearly 20 percent of the people voted for outright independence in 1952, but more than 67 percent voted for the Commonwealth, and helped by campaigns that failed to advertise what that status really meant, Muñoz managed to win election after election. With the economy improving and the escape valve of migration always wide open because of American citizenship, Commonwealth became the accepted temporary-permanent-transitory status of the Puerto Rican people.

As long as Muñoz kept the independent wing of his party in line and as long as islanders passed no laws that upset Congress, and, as long as no major economic problems occurred, Puerto Rico could stay relatively peaceful.

The problem was power. When Puerto Ricans needed it or wanted it, they had to go to Washington. Each trip resurrected the colonialism issue and consistently brought islanders and Americans back to square one. Like a bandage, Commonwealth status covered the sore, but political and economic realities ripped it off. Nothing hid the truth of colonialism from those who could not help but see it. In an effort to raise the political consciousness of Americans and Puerto Ricans, nationalists took their case to the United Nations, hoping to find there the permanent solution that had so far eluded Puerto Ricans of every political stripe.

THE UNITED NATIONS

Nationalists first went to the United Nations immediately after Puerto Rico's acceptance of Commonwealth status. Until 1952, the United States had abided by the United Nations charter; periodically submitting the reports required for any country's "non–self-governing territories." But once the island's electorate approved the Commonwealth, American and Puerto Rican representatives told the world that since Puerto Rico now ruled itself, the United Nations no longer had watchdog jurisdiction over the island's internal affairs, and the United States no longer needed to submit progress reports on social, economic, and educational conditions on the island.

Nationalists called this a "malicious fraud." Citing the congressional hearings that showed that nothing fundamental had changed, they asked the United Nations to face reality: Whether as an unincorporated territory or a free associated state, Puerto Rico remained an American colony. To counter these facts Americans pointed to the electorate's approval of Commonwealth. Nationalists said that Luis Muñoz Marin won only "because he appealed to tricks, gross misrepresentations, falsehoods, bribes, and coercion of all sorts to obtain at least a limited support for this spurious constitution."[50]

Ultimately the United Nations voted along cold war lines. The United States no longer had to submit colonial reports, but instead of the "walkover" the Americans expected, some resistance and criticism were heard. India supported the independentistas, charging that treaties between unequal nations masked colonialism. And of more importance to nationalists, the United Nations vote affirming Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status clearly indicated that the United Nations had the authority and competence to judge the status of territories like Puerto Rico. In 1952 that precedent posed no problems for the American position, but as the composition of the United Nations changed, decolonization became a hot issue, and all the while, the United States was stuck with a precedent it had established.

Trouble first appeared in 1960, when United Nations Resolution 1514 demanded "immediate steps" to abolish colonial relationships. All territories had to be set free, and that included Puerto Rico, because a second resolution clearly indicated that any associated state must be free to independently sever its ties to other nations. Since Congress had never given Puerto Rico such a right, indeed, since Congress explicitly and repeatedly affirmed its ultimate authority, Puerto Rico lacked the power required for the status of free associated state. In the eyes of the United Nations, Puerto Rico remained a colony.

Of course, reality had nothing to do with power politics. Backed by Cuba, independentistas made repeated attempts to get United Nations action but backed by threats, the United States consistently blocked efforts to put Puerto Rico's status on the General Assembly's agenda. For example, as former United Nations Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan saw it in 1975, the honor of the United States was on the line. He proposed that "we inform the members of the Decolonization Committee in their

capitals that we would regard voting against us on this matter* to be an unfriendly act." The cables had an immediate effect. Asked by a member of the Indian delegation, "Are you threatening us?" Moynihan answered, "yes." Honor apparently had its roots in power, because the United States carried the committee by a vote of 11 to 9, and Moynihan proudly cited a *New York Times* headline: "U.S. WINS A U.N. VICTORY ON PUERTO RICO."[51]

Through the mid-1970s only independentistas loudly complained to the United Nations regarding Puerto Rico's colonial status. Nationalists continued to criticize the United States, but given their poor showings at election time, the Americans could consistently argue that nationalists represented only a tiny, cantankerous portion of the Puerto Rican people and that they need not be taken seriously.

In 1978, upset by their repeated failures to obtain more power from Congress, Commonwealth supporters joined hands with the most radical of the aboveground independentistas—the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. As if this union wasn't enough of a blow to the American position, statehooders also came to the United Nations. In the past, they had refused even to appear before the Decolonization Committee, much less suggest that the United States owned a colony. Now statehooders publicly called Commonwealth a "quasi-colonial arrangement" while a former governor, Rafael Hernandez Colon—a man Ambassador Moynihan had called "singularly attractive and forceful"—took a position that essentially affirmed the 1960 resolutions of the United Nations. Puerto Rico would be free to associate with other nations only when it, and not Congress, controlled the island's ultimate fate.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Puerto Rican politicians supposedly fought with one another as fiercely as two cocks in an island arena. With all parties united, the United States could no longer claim that Cuba had made Puerto Rico a United Nations issue. As the *Washington Post* noted, "Virtually the whole spectrum of political opinion in Puerto Rico has appeared here this past week and criticized the island's commonwealth status. All the speakers, despite their otherwise conflicting views, agreed that there were at least vestiges of colonialism in Puerto Rico's current relationship with the United States."[52]

*The matter in question was a Cuban resolution reaffirming the right of the Puerto Rican people to self-determination and independence.

Nobody accepted the existing status. Since that much was clear, the Carter administration changed course. Instead of supporting the status quo, it advocated self-determination: Puerto Rico could be a state, a nation, or a Commonwealth; it was up to islanders to decide. Meanwhile, like Pontius Pilate, the Carter administration wished to wash its hands of the thorny Puerto Rican question. Islanders had the ball, and Carter would follow wherever they ran. Even if they ran in circles.

When the Reagan administration took over, Americans returned to a more traditional approach. For example, despite dangerous threats to the island's rum industry, Reagan never even mentioned his Caribbean-based initiative to improve other island's economies to Puerto Rican leaders; they found out about it after the proposals were already drawn up. In the United Nations, American Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick followed Moynihan's lead. When the Secretariat seemed ready to place Puerto Rico's status on the 1982 agenda, Kirkpatrick "made it clear to the nonaligned nations that, while abstention was understandable, a vote against the United States would carry penalties."[53] That immediately brought "our friends" around and once again, Puerto Rico took its traditional place on America's back burner.

Which is where Puerto Rico will stay until trouble occurs. Historically the United States notices the island only when it has no choice. We are generally willing to let bad enough alone. Meanwhile, burdened with a nightmarish economy (see chapter 9 for specifics on the economy) island politicians continue to repeat history. Indeed, today's battles mirror the struggles that rocked the island forty years ago. Today, as in 1945, the dominant Popular Party contains an independentista wing that, dissatisfied with Puerto Rico's colonial status, threatens to break away from the center that supports the Commonwealth. So far Governor Hernandez Colon (first elected in 1972, reelected in 1984) has artfully managed to keep his party together. Whether or not he succeeds, the larger issue is the perpetual stalemate called Puerto Rican politics. Year after year and generation after generation, islanders continue to argue about the same issue: What will Puerto Rico be?

The stalemate is perpetual and, for groups like Los Macheteros, maddening. Nothing changes, except that, as one nationalist told me, "The federal food stamps make our people welfare junkies." In an effort to break the deadlock that began

in 1898, Los Macheteros decided to try something new. Perhaps, they reasoned, if Puerto Rico had a group of successful revolutionaries, islanders would decide that enough is enough. Success would breed self-assurance, which would breed mass action, which would break the deadlock: Islanders would opt for independence.

This much is undeniable: Los Macheteros exist and Americans must analyze their aims, organization, and methods only because, after eighty-eight years of American control, the island is indeed suspended "like a disembodied shade in an intermediate state of ambiguous existence."

NOTES

1. On Alexander VI see Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984), 75–104.
2. See, for example, Arturo Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean* (Rio Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1971); Loida Figueroa, *History of Puerto Rico* (New York: Anaya Books, 1974); Kal Wagenheim, *Puerto Rico: A Profile* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
3. This suggestion appears in William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).
4. For the population figures see Julian Steward et al., *Puerto Rico* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1956), 36.
5. Arturo Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), especially 35–37. See also Stan Steiner, *The Islands: The World of the Puerto Ricans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
6. Ibid., 46.
7. Steward et al., *Puerto Rico,* 496–97.
8. Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 57–65.
9. Juan Garcia Passalacqua, *Puerto Rico: Equality and Freedom at Issue* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 24–29. See also Steward et al., *Puerto Rico,* 492.
10. Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 75–77.
11. Garcia Passalacqua, *Puerto Rico,* 25.
12. Figueroa, *History of Puerto Rico,* 205.
13. Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 276–78.
14. Figueroa, *History of Puerto Rico,* 287.
15. Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 115. See also Manuel Maldonado Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
16. Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 121–23.
17. Speech of Whitelaw Reid to the Lotos Club, February 11, 1899, reprinted in *Our New Possessions and the Diplomatic Process by Which They Were Obtained* (New York: The Tribune, 1899), 87–88.
18. Ibid., 88.
19. Ibid., 83.
20. *Congressional Record,* 56th Congress, First Session, 1900, Volume 33, 2472.
21. Ibid., 2475.
22. Ibid., 2473. See also José Cabranes, *Citizenship and the American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), especially 41–43.
23. See Elihu Root, *Military and Colonial Policy of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 170. See also *Hearings Before the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico,* Senate Document Number 147, 56th Congress, First Session, especially 34–36.
24. *Congressional Record,* 2475.
25. Cited in Cabranes, *Citizenship and the American Empire,* 42.
26. Root, *Military and Colonial Policy,* 165. See also Edward Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico 1898–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952).
27. Cited, for example, in Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 157.
28. Robert Hunter, *Historical Survey of the Puerto Rican Status Question,* in Status of Puerto Rico, Selected Background Studies Prepared for the United States–Puerto Rico Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), 68.
29. Ibid., 68; Morales Carrion, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Social History,* 166.
30. Raymond Carr, *Puerto Rico* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 48.
31. Arthur Dana, *Puerto Rico's Case: Outcome of American Sovereignty* (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor Company, 1928), 7.
32. Ibid., 58–64.
33. On Albizu Campos, see Federico Ribes Tovar, *Albizu Campos* (New York: Plus Ultra, 1971), especially 33–34. See also Iris Zavala and Rafael Rodriguez, eds., *The Intellectual Roots of Independence: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Political Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
34. Pedro Albizu Campos, "The Concept of Race," in Zavala and Rodriguez, eds., *The Intellectual Roots of Independence,* 181–82.
35. See, for example, Juan Mari Bras, "Albizu Campos: His Historical Significance," in Zavala and Rodriguez, eds., *Intellectual Roots of Independence,* 197–207.
36. See Thomas Matthews, *Puerto Rican Political Parties and the New Deal* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), 250.
37. Ribes Tovar, *Albizu Campos,* 61.
38. Ibid., 61–63.
39. Matthews, *Puerto Rican Political Parties,* 268–69.
40. See Arthur Garfield Hays, Chairman, Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Civil Rights in Puerto Rico (Washington, 1937), reprinted in *Puerto Rican Nationalism: A Reader* edited by José Lopez (Chicago: Editorial Coqui, 1977), 89.
41. See, for example, Roberta Ann Johnson, *Puerto Rico: Commonwealth or Colony?* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 25–27.
42. Robert W. Anderson, *Party Politics in Puerto Rico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 104.
43. Hearings Before the Committee on Public Lands, House of Representatives, 81st Congress, *Puerto Rico Constitution* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), 94–95. For the election returns see Johnson, *Puerto Rico,* 49.
44. Ibid., 20–21, 33.
45. Ibid., 99–101.
46. Ribes Tovar, *Albizu Campos,* 100–101.
47. Hearings Before the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Approving Puerto Rican Constitution,* United States Senate, 82nd Congress, Second Session, April, 1952, especially 38–40. See also Gordon Lewis, *Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 355–57. Also Hunter, *Historical Survey,* 120–21. Also Sakari Sariloa, *Puerto Rican Dilemma* (New York: Kennikat, 1979).
48. See, for example, Johnson, *Puerto Rico,* 36, 67–68.
49. See Ruben Berrios Martinez, "Independence for Puerto Rico: The Only Solution," *Foreign Affairs* (April, 1976): 561–83.
50. See Carr, *Puerto Rico,* 344–45.
51. Daniel P. Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1978), 120–21.
52. Garcia Passalacqua, *Puerto Rico,* 131.
53. Carr, *Puerto Rico,* 363.

8

Los Macheteros

JACK SWEENEY is a bright, competent West Hartford cop who gave me a fingerprints lesson. Using a doll-size feather duster, Jack first demonstrated how he normally dusts for prints, and then, wishing his department could afford one, Jack described the new, laser-light device that allows the FBI to uncover a print that the dust misses. With the new device, even if a man had only brushed a table or chair, it's possible to take a print, match it with another, and prove, for example, that Victor Gerena actually traveled in the motor home the FBI had seen in New Paltz and subsequently confiscated in Boston.

Jack felt certain the FBI would conduct hundreds of tests on the vehicle. I eventually confirmed this fact with a federal source who obligingly provided this additional information: Lasers or no, Victor's prints weren't on the motor home. Agents had gone over that vehicle with every detecting device at its disposal, but try as they might, they found no sign of Victor. Either he'd wiped away every trace of his supposedly extended stay or he'd never been there in the first place.

The latter possibility turned out to be the truth. Once Victor left the Wells Fargo depot, he and his one companion had quickly met other Macheteros at or near the Swiss Chalet Motel. They transferred the loot and Victor's ID to the motor home and split. The money went to Boston, Victor did not. In an attempt to mislead the authorities, Victor's ID was dropped in a highway rest area where it would be (and eventually was) discovered by park personnel.

Meanwhile Victor went south. My understanding is that he first went to New York and then traveled to Mexico on the false papers provided by the Machetero network. After a brief stay, Victor went to Cuba, and not because he's a Communist or because the robbery was planned by Fidel Castro. Since at least 1898, the Cubans have often provided assistance to Puerto Rican independentistas. Cuba was not only a safe haven, it was also the

second-best Hispanic home for a man who knew that, once he had robbed Wells Fargo, he would have to lay low for an extended period of time. After all, no matter how heroically he had performed and no matter how enormous the haul, Victor Gerena was a soldier in a secret army. His orders were to stay underground until he could once again safely play a role in the struggle to free Puerto Rico.

But Victor had played only one part—albeit the most important one—in an "expropriation" that was itself only one part of a larger strategy for the success of Los Macheteros in particular and the Puerto Rican independence movement in general. As the Lone Ranger, Victor attracted attention, but he got away only because of careful planning by the Machetero network already in place in Boston, New York, Dallas, Chicago, and Hartford. As Tony Duffy used to remind me in the early stages of the investigation, "The guy disappeared into thin air. And we can't figure out how he did it."

The answer, of course, is that Los Macheteros did it, as part of an operation that raised the funds needed to sustain an organization with more than three hundred members on the island of Puerto Rico and the continent of North America.* Los Macheteros are a highly disciplined, well organized, and, thanks to Victor and Wells Fargo, fully financed army of Puerto Rican revolutionaries. They expect no quick end to their struggle, and they fully anticipate defeats along the way, because no matter how careful, dedicated, and intelligent they are, Los Macheteros remain a small band of soldiers engaged in a war with the police and military forces of a superpower. Like Sisyphus with his rock, Los Macheteros knowingly face what appears to be an impossible task. But unlike Sisyphus, they have hope because their overall strategy is based on arousing the masses. Since the island does actually contain a large number of closet independentistas (an island adage I constantly heard repeated says, "After two or three drinks every Puerto Rican is pro-independence"), if Los Macheteros can stimulate a revolutionary consciousness, there is—so the reasoning goes—no sane way the United States could deny them. Eventually the costs would greatly outweigh whatever advantages the colony offers.

But how to arouse the masses? There's no simple answer to

*This represents my educated estimate of the number of committed Macheteros.

that one, says Victor Acosta, the head of Los Macheteros, because five hundred years of colonialism have so deeply instilled the twin myths of impotence and inferiority that a visitor finds them even at centers openly dedicated to the celebration of what is purely Puerto Rican.

Consider the two museums that try to preserve and re-create the culture of the Taino Indians. Both are fascinating, but since the cell of Los Macheteros that robbed Wells Fargo called itself Los Tainos, the museums held a special significance for me. What did a group of Indians have to do with $7 million? And why were twentieth-century revolutionaries identifying with fifteenth-century preliterates?

Once visitors at the Ponce historical center cross a new wooden bridge, they walk on tamped-down, ten-foot-wide "avenues." With the sun shining and so many flowering plants always in bloom, these natural causeways provide a regal and stunning entrance to the religious center of Indian culture, the ballfields, or *bateys,* of the Taino people.

Proud, peaceful, and self-sufficient, the Tainos lived in cone-shaped grass huts and slept on hammocks (the Tainos gave us both the word and the device). No matter where they placed the numerous huts that formed a village, the Tainos always stayed close to the ballfields where they played the games that were both a private passion and a public spectacle. One archaeologist has speculated that in prehistoric times the banks of the Rio Grande de Arecibo were so thickly lined with ballfields that villagers could always remain in sight of one.

In Ponce and at the museum in the mountains near Utuado, the fields are neatly and precisely delimited by rows of standing stones. Varying in size from one to four feet, they mark off enclosures that range from twenty by forty to two hundred by four hundred feet. As at Wimbledon and Forest Hills, there are small practice courts at the sides, larger fields for the majority of the matches, and a center court for the contests that create champions. In ancient Puerto Rico, Indian spectators sat on rough stone benches and cheered not only for the skill and antics of the players but for the gods who were honored by a game that normally held religious as well as recreational significance.

Nobody knows what religious purpose the ballgames served. Since there appears to be some relationship between the arrangement of the stones and the cyclical movement of the sun, moon, and stars, scholars guess that the game offered a way of deciphering the wishes of the gods. In ancient Rome, priests analyzed the livers of sacrificed animals to uncover the gods' intentions; perhaps in prehistoric Puerto Rico the less violent Indians invented a game that, as it provided enjoyment, also announced the divine will.

The ballgames were certainly the ceremonial center of Taino life and the museums have done a splendid job of preserving them. But the literature that is distributed at the site apologizes for the simplicity of the Tainos. Visitors are told, "It is true that the Taino society never attained the glories of the Central and South American civilizations' religion, art, etc., but nevertheless the Taino culture achieved a level of social organization and culture which meshed with the environment."

Why is the comparison necessary? Why write that the Tainos were second-rate? By whose standards? Why provide modern Puerto Ricans with a second-rate image of self and society?

The anthropologist who wrote the commentary surrendered her judgment of the Tainos to outsiders, specifically to the Americans who wrote about the island. Given their insular location, and low level of technological knowledge, the Tainos represent a logical evolutionary development. They are found lacking in comparison with the Incas, Aztecs, and other classical Indian cultures, but, for Puerto Rico, they are a predictable, societal pattern. The scientist had judged Taino culture on a false basis, had come up short, and, at a center devoted to Puerto Rican native culture, had passed on the conclusions to each and every visitor.

For Los Macheteros, the anthropologist's remarks symbolize a huge but not insurmountable problem: How do we get our people to storm the Bastille if their minds are already imprisoned by the attitudes and beliefs of others?

Los Macheteros have no one answer to this question. Indeed, as we shall soon see, they are often sharply divided over tactics. But when it comes to overall strategy, Los Macheteros agree that they are first and foremost revolutionaries of the mind. They are at war with the personal consequences of colonialism, and their actions cannot be understood until we recognize that they are reacting to images—of the inferior, impotent, docile Puerto Rican—that begin at places like the museums and cut across all aspects of island life.

In an influential 1960 essay, "The Docile Puerto Rican," island playright Rene Marques defines docility "as the lack of strength or even the will to put up resistance to what others demand or command."[1] Marques makes no attempt to explain why Puerto Ricans are docile. He only wants to prove it's a fact.

The Korean War had absolutely no bearing on any islander's life; Puerto Ricans had no right to vote in the federal elections that elected the representatives who decided where they were to risk their lives; and politicians like Albizu Campos told anyone willing to listen that Puerto Ricans were being shipped to Asia in numbers way out of proportion to their percentage of the total population. That islanders were used as cannon fodder in Korea is still a very touchy topic among independentistas. Yet Puerto Ricans not only showed up to fight, they consistently received awards for heroism in the service of American interests.

That sheepishness, turned upside down, is the self-destructive behavior manifested by the old-line nationalist movement. For Marques, the underside of docility is "repressing or inhibiting the normal aggressive impulse so as to direct it morbidly toward oneself." The docile lack strength, and instead of the effective political terrorism used by, say, the Algerians, Puerto Rican nationalists commit suicide. They engage in utterly futile actions (Marques cites the attempted assassination of President Truman as a conspicuous example) because at heart, their docile natures inhibit the discipline and methodology that lets other patriots succeed. Call it a "martyr complex," call it a "suicidal impulse." For Marques, the key is docility. If Puerto Ricans had the strength to truly resist American authority, they would stop tying their "bold and determined actions" to an obsession with certain death and create instead a methodical program capable of ushering in the revolution—and life after it, as well.

Is Marques correct? Do the data prove his point? Large numbers of dissident Puerto Ricans believe their brothers and sisters are the sheep described by Marques.* As the head of Los Macheteros recently put it, their actions are specifically designed to create social consciousness by restoring pride in self and nation. When, as Marques suggested, poorly organized nationalists looked like bunglers, they acted "as an accomplice to the intelligence campaigns of the FBI." Failure after failure killed any budding faith in the possibility of radical change.

*Or by Antonio S. Pedreira, thirty years earlier, in another influential essay entitled "Insularismo" (San Juan: Editorial Antillance, 1971).

In sharp contrast to the almost ad hoc actions of a beloved nationalist like Albizu Campos, Los Macheteros are a crackerjack team of professional revolutionaries whose primary aim, at this stage of the revolution, is to successfully engage in one anticolonial strike after another. Eventually, like a Caribbean hurricane building up force, the inspirational effects of today's Tainos will move the masses to storm the manifestations of illegitimate American authority.

As examples of their efforts, Los Macheteros cite the "sledgehammer" blow delivered at Muñoz Airport (see chapter 3). When the nine National Guard planes were destroyed, "our military action gave recognition to our organization on a national as well as an international level . . . And we were able to reactivate the fervor of our people . . . because this blow was the most severe given to the Yankees in North American territory since Pearl Harbor and outside the territory since the TET offensive in Vietnam." On May 16, 1982, "four United States Navy enlisted men assigned to the U.S.S. *Pensacola* were attacked while returning to their ship which was docked in Old San Juan." They were shot —one man died, the other three were injured—by automatic rifle fire coming from a maroon Cadillac. Along with the Group for the Liberation of Vieques, Los Macheteros announced that the attack was in retaliation for the Navy exercise Ocean Venture 82.

On April 21, 1981, four individuals robbed a Wells Fargo armored car in Santurce, Puerto Rico, escaping with roughly $348,000 in cash. Los Macheteros soon announced they would use the expropriated funds to "promote the development and organization of the revolution in Puerto Rico."

On January 25, 1985, at roughly 10 A.M., an explosion occurred at the United States Courthouse in Old San Juan. By design, no one was injured, but Los Macheteros took credit for the action when they sent UPI a communiqué indicating that the attack was a memorial to the late poet and intimate of Albizu Campos, Juan Antonio Corretjer, "who had spent his entire life fighting against Yankee imperialism."[2]

Since their first public announcement in 1978, Los Macheteros have averaged two or three incidents a year, and as with Victor and Wells Fargo, they welcome any opportunity to publicize their contempt for American authority. Soon after the attack on Muñoz Airport, for example, a San Juan television station played a videotape produced by Los Macheteros. It showed

hooded figures in fatigue uniforms, and the voice-over indicated that eleven people had participated in the attack, with seven in charge of security and four in charge of demolition. Los Macheteros have flaunted every one of their "armed propaganda actions," because above all else, they seek to show that Puerto Ricans are not powerless, not submissive, not resigned to the poverty that is.

Change can occur, and it conceivably will. If history is any guide, the arrests of August 30 will move the remaining (and new) Macheteros to use the Wells Fargo funds to nourish an army that, starting in the underground, sooner or later will be brought to the surface by the applause of the Puerto Rican people, no longer docile.

If Los Macheteros are first and foremost Puerto Rican nationalists, they are also socialists with a distinct Leninist tinge. Only a select, audacious, and agile few can serve as a revolutionary vanguard. Acting on the advice of Lenin—and the criticism of natives like Rene Marques—Los Macheteros are an exceedingly methodical and thoroughly trained group, with written guidelines for everything.

Consider a document entitled "Organization of the Puerto Rican People's Army." It details the group's structure with a precision that would make an mathematician smile with delight. At the bottom of the totem pole stands the combat unit, the basic building block of the Macheteros army. Each unit contains five persons, but the leader is the only one that has to be a member of the Macheteros' political arm (more on that side of Los Macheteros later). This person controls the unit's arsenal—normally consisting of a short weapon, two automatic weapons, one semiautomatic rifle, and one shotgun—which allows the combat unit "to be in full capacity to fulfill a complete specific mission without needing additional elements."

The beauty of the combat unit is its size. It can easily operate under everyday circumstances (that is, actions in urban and semiurban areas); the five members can often meet to inconspicuously plan or train; and, using the car that is also part of any combat unit's standard equipment, the five (with, say, three in the car and two on foot) can blend so smoothly into human traffic that once a mission is over a safe getaway is easily effected.

Combat units normally function as part of a group, the line

cell, that sits in the middle of the Macheteros military hierarchy. At the center of the line cell is a squad of "five combatants": one political leader, one military leader, and three leaders of combat units. Thus a line cell has seventeen members,* with a full complement of weapons that, ideally, "should be of the same caliber and, if possible, the same kind utilized by the enemy so as to facilitate the logistical supply."

Linked to the line cell is a group that rarely participates in combat action. The supporting cell is again composed of five members. Its role is to furnish "the logistic, organizational, and propaganda support" essential for the success of a Machetero mission. Only one member (the leader) belongs to the party. Support means "two or three medical or paramedic elements and a combatant whose principal responsibility includes providing typing, repairs, equipment, propaganda, printed matter, mimeographs, loudspeakers [say for the two Three Kings giveaways in Puerto Rico], radios, places to store equipment, explosives, etc."

The supporting cell, a mobile motorpool for Machetero needs, is controlled by a member of the party who is a part of a formation. Each formation contains five cells "of which four will be line and one support." This means 73 combatants (4 line cells x 17 equals 68, plus 5 in the supporting cell) led by an individual who is a member of the party. The advantage of the formation is that it allows members "to operate with major secretivity and dispersion in a geographical area of Puerto Rico composed of various towns." If, for example, members take an existing senatorial district, it is easy to see how "the formation could have its cells and its combat units dispersed in different towns."

If phrases like "major secretivity" bring to mind the managerial manuals of a modern bureaucracy, the resemblance between Los Macheteros and a well-run corporation is more than superficial. Each is an organization with precisely delimited and official jurisdictional areas, and each has a firmly ordered system of super- and subordination. But instead of lodging ultimate authority in the hands of one person, Los Macheteros have a military commission at the peak of their army's hierarchy.

Surprisingly, the organizational document I have does not specify the number of commission members on the military com-

*The political leader, the military leader, and the three combat units that each contain five members.

mission. Instead it focuses on their role, which is to prepare the units and cells for commencement of armed activity. The military commission has to create an "infra-logistical structure capable of surpassing all repressive intents of the enemy." There are subcommissions of military intelligence, military training, transportation, provisions, and general services. A subcommission of finances prepares budgets, establishes disbursement controls, and accounts for the funds in the group's treasury.

Quite often organizational documents bear no relationship to reality. Not so in the case of Los Macheteros. They operate in cells, they generally obey the designated chain of command, and they consistently carry a respect for precise rules and regulations into a wide variety of nonmilitary areas. Consider the payroll lists of monthly salaries for all full-time members. Bear in mind that wages are adjusted for inflation and that these are 1981 salaries:

1. Basic salary, single person: $400.
2. Basic salary, married and wife works: $400.
3. Basic salary, married and wife does not work: $500.
4. Basic salary, married with children and wife works: $35 additional for each child.
5. Basic salary, married with children and wife does not work: $60 additional for each child.

In a December 1981, amendment to the scale, Los Macheteros agreed to provide medical benefits—up to $500 per *approved* doctor—and they also paid for university training if the individual received commission approval. If a comrade was refused benefits, feelings of resentment sometimes surfaced. In an angry moment, Juan Segarra complained that "if you don't say something it's forgotten and you get screwed. They [Macheteros policymakers] say, 'We can't be paying schools for the people,' but why did Jan get his paid, huh? No, no, it's not right."

The rigorous rules and regulations—which may seem surprising given the wild-eyed revolutionaries depicted by the media—exist because Los Macheteros are running an army. They are involved in a war, in which political considerations are always more important than any military mission.

Los Macheteros agree with Carl von Clausewitz (and with political figures as different as Henry Kissinger and Vladimir Lenin) that war is nothing but a continuation of politics by other means. Since their goal is to awaken the now docile Puerto Rican

people, above the military commission, which carries out policy, sits a Central Committee, which makes policy. It is entirely possible that some Macheteros hold positions in both groups, but political decisions always dominate, because the Macheteros know there is no way they can win a purely military war with the United States. You defeat the Yankees only if you change people's minds. While the end (independence) justifies the means (killing American military personnel), the means are always guided by the supposed political results of any military action. For example, never use violence indiscriminately. Destroy objects of widespread resentment, because that generates "admiration" among the masses. And never forget that, in addition to three million Puerto Ricans, 240 million Americans read the papers and listen to Dan Rather. They too judge the independentistas, and their appraisal could be just as important as that made by the Puerto Rican people. As in Vietnam, the United States might leave because the human and material costs become too great. Or if Los Macheteros could do a better job with publicity, Americans might perceive the fundamental validity of the independence position.

If this sounds too rational, too methodical, too computerized (Los Macheteros keep large amounts of information stored on an Apple computer), remember how well scientific management served the cause of the machete wielders. It took nearly five years for the well-financed FBI to break through their cover; even then the authorities needed two lucky breaks (the ticket stub in the Blazer and the accidental safe-house haul); and, with only sixteen people under arrest, close to three hundred hardcore Macheteros are still at large.

This large organization has enjoyed a good deal of success because members of the group are consistently able to blend their revolutionary affiliation into a life-style that meshes with everyday Puerto Rican (and American) life. Some Macheteros do nothing but prepare for independence, but the vast majority of group members live normal lives that only when necessary are interrupted to make way for the revolution.

The group's accomplishments are firmly rooted in scores of people who lead double lives. To get a better feel for who they are and what they do, let's examine the "onstage" and "backstage" existences of some Macheteros, whom I have heavily disguised for the purposes of this book.

Although Pedro now lives in Chicago, he was born and grew up in a rural area of Puerto Rico that has long been a breeding ground for independentistas. He got his first military training from Uncle Sam.* He left the island in 1979 because he wanted to avoid the government harassment nationalists often encounter. Pedro became a member of Los Macheteros in 1981, and since he joined, he has participated in no violent revolutionary activities. He works in a factory, lives quietly with his wife and three children, and waits for a call to action. Meanwhile, he openly supports groups who advocate a peaceful path to independence, and, like all Macheteros, spends a great deal of his free time looking over his shoulder. Since the arrest in 1983 of four Chicago members of the FALN shows that police and FBI spies are still trying to actively infiltrate the underground movement, Pedro shows his backstage self to very few people, and when a stranger appears in his life, Pedro checks him or her out. In one sense that's a waste of time, but it's a good deal better than being caught.

Pepe is sixty-eight years old. He has been an independentista since he first listened to Albizu Campos in the 1930s. He knows every prominent activist on the island and got involved with Los Macheteros when his daughter asked for his support. Day to day, Pepe runs a successful grocery store that provides a solid cover for his generally nonviolent assistance to Los Macheteros. He helps hide people who must remain underground, or finds the farms where new members are trained, or attends anticolonial gatherings—say at the local headquarters of the Puerto Rican Independence party—which are perfect occasions for recruiting new members. If Pepe spots someone who looks like a promising candidate, he makes an initial contact. Long before anything meaningful occurs, the individual is thoroughly checked out. Discreet questions may be asked of friends and relatives, Macheteros watch him in nonpolitical settings, and especially if the individual has spent time in the United States, efforts are made to investigate his foreign pursuits. One informant said that, given the level of suspicion and the need for airtight security, if an investigation turns up even a hint of questionable activity on the mainland, the potential recruit is immediately rejected.

Pepe is an old-time independentista. His daughter is a crack-

*It is normal for many Puerto Rican revolutionaries to join the Army or Navy as a way of getting free, sophisticated training in weaponry.

erjack revolutionary of the type Los Macheteros seek to nurture and sustain. At her father's urging, she attended the University of Puerto Rico in the late 1960s, and receptive to the Young Turks who resisted the draft and fought against the ROTC, Maria was quickly swept up in the militancy and passion of the island's pro-independence movement, the short-lived MPI *(El Movimiento Pro Independencia)*. From close up, Maria witnessed the transformation of the MPI into a Marxist-Leninist party—if the Cubans could succeed, why not the Puerto Ricans?—and, already in agreement with the overall ideology of Los Macheteros, she became a member in the late 1970s. Today, onstage, she holds an executive position in the island's government, while backstage, she provides cover for San Juan's Macheteros, oversees the disbursement of organizational funds, and helps develop strategy for the group's future activities.

Juan grew up and still lives in New York. His parents were apolitical, his teachers in Brooklyn told him nothing about colonialism in Puerto Rico, and on the streets, he learned more about drugs than independence. What changed Juan were too many experiences with prejudice and a civil rights movement that produced not only Black Panthers but Puerto Rican Young Lords. Juan looked up to the Lords. They made his latent sense of pride manifest and got him interested in his culture. When Los Macheteros came calling in 1982, Juan quickly said yes. Today he has his own handyman business, but between jobs, Juan has trained in Cuba and helped recruit new Macheteros. If needed, he's ready to further the cause by robbing another branch of Wells Fargo or, as at Sebana Seca, participating in retaliatory attacks against the enemies of independence.

As these portraits suggest, many Macheteros spend most of their time "laying low." Like Victor in Hartford, they hold down a job, live quiet, nondescript lives, keep in shape by constant exercise —Victor used to jog near the spot where he left the Buick—and infrequently attend meetings that are held only when necessary. When meetings do occur, all Macheteros behave in accordance with specific and exacting instructions about the character and use of any safe house.

Since the safe-house apartment, home, or office should never be located in a "hot" area, Macheteros learn to stay away from any location containing drug trafficking, prostitution, or other

illegal activities. They also stay away from police stations, "repressive agency offices," armories, or facilities used by groups of nationalists or leftists.

The idea is to inconspicuously blend into the community. Macheteros try to avoid attracting attention by choosing meeting spots in private places in publicly respectable areas. If it's an apartment house, they make sure it's a big one, with lots of apartments, many entrances, and no crowds of people gathered outside. They try to stay away from places with meddlesome neighbors, and if they see people, they exchange the meaningless pleasantries that are a part of everyday etiquette. Rudeness stands out; polite nothings are, like the elevator ride to the apartment or office, taken for granted.

Once a safe house is found, members must be quite careful before they enter it. A thorough check for surveillance is mandatory, "dry cleaning" tactics should be routinely employed, "cars should be parked as far away from the safe house as possible," arrival times should be staggered, participants should use different entrances, some climbing stairs and others riding elevators, and, especially important, if a meeting includes comrades from other combat units, members must remember to put on the hoods that guarantee anonymity. Don't learn who the other soldiers are, and in the event of capture, you can truthfully say, even to a lie detector, that you don't know any Macheteros.

Or in the event that you turn out to be a squealer, the hoods, along with the use of code names, protect loyal Macheteros. When former member Carlos Rodriguez-Rodriguez was found guilty of bank fraud in 1984, his fifty-seven-year sentence turned him into a *chota* (a squealer). He apparently cooperated as much as possible with the FBI, but in many instances he could provide only useless information. Yes, he'd met a Rita, a Diana, and a Pancho, but what good did that do the authorities unless they could link the names to facial descriptions or true identities?

Los Macheteros wisely operate on a need-to-know basis. One combat unit often knows nothing about an other's membership and projects, and if it does, the intelligence available is too general to allow an indictment. In Los Macheteros political and military information flows down only when necessary and, using the beepers strapped to the sides of many full-time members, knowledgeable comrades can sometimes alert one another to a likely search and seizure. If you possess incriminating evidence, the material is to be destroyed before the authorities arrive. Police

might also miss important notes because a member used the invisible ink fountain pens that are a standard tool of clandestine groups.

To protect their identities when on a mission, Los Macheteros say it is best to avoid false IDs. The organization can provide, to a limited extent, some basic false documents, but the best identification is a legitimate one obtained through official channels. That is what Ojeda Rios allegedly did when he registered the Superior Motor Home in Texas. To get a legitimate license and registration, a Machetero would follow this kind of advice. Obtain a post office box or a cold (safe) address that guarantees risk-free receipt of the documents. Rent everything in an assumed name, and in dealing with the address problem—there's always one needed for a license or vehicle registration—use one in an area where mail is not distributed house by house or, as a neat alternative, report a broken mailbox at X address in a manner that would justify the request that your mail be kept at the post office.

With such IDs, members can travel anonymously, rapidly disappear when necessary, and purchase materials that they do not wish to be associated with them. And a false ID can allow time for the organization to contend with security measures in case of arrest. Assuming no bugs or double agents, other Macheteros can go to your real home—authorities would theoretically be at the false address—and comrades could tidy up before the authorities arrived.

While many skills can be learned from a manual, others require on-site training. For members not trained by Uncle Sam, Los Macheteros offer courses in the following areas: first aid, locksmithing, forgery, photography, scuba diving, makeup, the handling and use of explosives, the handling and use of firearms, and the manufacture of automobile license plates. Once individuals complete the military training, they are full members of the group. They're now ready for action, but only when called, which isn't often.

To store their supplies of *manteca* (literally, "butter" or "lard," the code name for weapons) and *libreta* (literally, "notebook," the code name for explosives), Los Macheteros purchased a farmhouse, brought in their construction crew, and when the work was done, *La Palangana* (The Washbowl) had a new bathroom, gratings in all the upstairs and downstairs windows, and a workshop for production and experimentation. The construction

crew wrote a pleasing final report for the commanders. "While one of the projects of greatest difficulty" was a hiding place for the weapons, the task "was finished and it is a very good place, although there are still some problems to be resolved to eliminate the humidity which filters in."

Presumably Los Macheteros solved the humidity problem, but they failed to keep out the "petty thieves" who soon stole weapons, scanners, and communication equipment from The Washbowl. Crime is such a serious problem on the island that besides bars on all the windows, many city and rural residents use wrought iron to literally fence in their homes. Beautiful houses are covered with bars as inviting as those on a bank vault. It's a necessary evil, and perhaps the route Los Macheteros took because their final report states that they were "initiating a plan to eliminate security problems." In the meantime, those in command could rest assured that the custodial staff were cleaning up La Palangana, and they moved the comrade who acted as a front for the farm to a safer location.

To fund these operations, Los Macheteros provided one another with detailed budgets. In the farmhouse report mentioned above, the writer discusses a bathroom and other "final touches" (painting, plastering) that were not listed in the original request, but luckily "money was obtained from elsewhere." All available evidence indicates that Los Macheteros are as careful in their accounting procedures as the FBI. Joseph Rodriguez, the agent in charge on the island, indicated that "it kind of reminds you of the bureau, where you have to produce receipts for everything that you submit."

Recall the toy giveaway in Hartford. The FBI says that Norman Ramirez left for New York with $12,000. Out of that he had to furnish air fares for a number of people, rent the truck, buy the toys, and purchase meals. When he returned home, Norman had to account for literally every dollar he had spent, down to the sunglasses he bought to disguise his companions. His comrades seemed upset when, out of the $12,000, Norman had failed to account for $22.75. Aware of the microscopes that would soon be turned on their financial records, the Tainos combat unit found a pigeonhole (food) for the missing $22.75. Now they would have the approval of the auditing department.

One reason to act like Ebenezer Scrooge is scarce resources. Even with $7 million, Los Macheteros had to keep a tight rein on expenditures. Law rockets cost good money. So do mortars, the equipment in the farm workshop, the monthly payroll for full-time members, and the rental fees—$2,000 a month in one location—for safe houses. They watched every penny spent to assure the group's long-term survival. They could hardly take Victor's haul to a bank and fund expenditures with the interest earned on Wells Fargo's principal.

But the group's strict accounting procedures are more than anything a result of the profound commitment to the revolution displayed by virtually all Macheteros. FBI agents call them terrorists, but no one calls a Machetero a thief. They did take $7 million, but if you consider the fact that no Machetero accepts the legitimacy of federal authority, you enter a different world with its own moral standards. It is unthinkable for a Machetero to steal from the movement.

Dedication to the cause does not mean that Macheteros are fanatics or zealots. Those words connote an absence of perspective and a sense of rigidity. Juan Segarra, for example, rightly had a reputation as a ladies man; besides a wife and two kids on the island, he supposedly had a lover in Boston, and when, after his arrest, Anne Gassin reportedly agreed to help the FBI, one of Segarra's friends said: "I always told him his cock would get him in trouble."

Los Macheteros are neither saints nor ascetics. They have faults, and they enjoy life. But a puritanical streak does run through the movement because this is, by its own definition, a serious and responsible organization. Macheteros condemn alcohol as passionately as AA, they totally reject the use of drugs, they abhor the crime that forces islanders to lock out the world with wrought iron bars, they greatly value hard work, and they applaud sharp discipline in personal and social behavior.

Despite the open and violent rejection of American beliefs and values, many Macheteros are still determined by them. If you condemn indulging in alcohol because "they will think that's what all Puerto Ricans do" or applaud fidelity because "they will think all islanders come from unstable, unloving families," then your moral ideology is still guided by the presumed attitudes of the Americans Los Macheteros claim to reject.

Factions are the poison of political life. They divert energy away from a movement's goal and back onto the organization itself.

The hateful passions produced by factions can destroy a group just as easily as the most ardent efforts of the FBI.

Although Los Macheteros always knew how deadly factions could be, they were unable to prevent the internal battles, especially those in 1984–85, that prompted Ojeda to call Segarra a "counterrevolutionary" and Avelino Gonzalez Claudio to state, "This guy [Segarra] has got to be bullshit. Anybody who knows him is gonna laugh in his fucking face."

Nobody was able to quiet the tensions that seriously damaged the group's effectiveness. Members argued about a variety of issues: personality, control of the money, careless security, loans without permission. They never stopped doing so because as James Madison wrote in *The Federalist* "as long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."

Tactics, for example, are an especially divisive issue whenever Macheteros gather. Some members believe that only retaliatory violence can arouse the Puerto Rican masses, while others argue that force is too often counterproductive. In a world at war with terrorists, Los Macheteros get lumped in with brutes and the movement suffers. For some, Three Kings Day marked a new direction in the history of Los Macheteros. Nonviolent but still anticolonial, the toy giveaway got a great deal of positive publicity, appealed to cultural pride, nourished the Macheteros image of audacity, and attracted no blame as the result of violence.

For some, the giveaway offered a perfect example of a new way to win over the masses. But others still favored violence so, instead of trying to cure the permanent cause of factions, perceptual differences, Los Macheteros wisely tried to curb the effects of political conflicts. Commanders at first made an appeal to common sense: Weren't the differences less important than the goal of independence? When that appeal failed to end the dissension, group leaders took the ultimate step. Filiberto Ojeda Ríos, as ardent an independentista as Puerto Rico contains, was reportedly expelled from the policymaking body of Los Macheteros on June 4, 1985. His combat unit continued to function, but outside the group's power structure, he was weaker and so were Los Macheteros.

As Madison noted long ago, if you can't prevent the existence of a passion or interest, the only alternative is to make it impossible for a faction to "concert and carry into effect" its version

of power politics. For the United States, Madison suggested a system of checks and balances that would make it much harder for "men of factious tempers" to betray the interests of the whole.

But Los Macheteros are a clandestine revolutionary organization. They eliminate unending factions by expulsion, and if that's both inevitable and necessary, it's also one explanation for the failure of the Puerto Rican independence movement. Factions are poison. And until Los Macheteros can subordinate their different perceptions to the goal they all desire—independence—factions may do as much damage as the FBI.

The puritanical streak, the precise bookkeeping, the factions, the weapons used to kill: These are all sides of Los Macheteros, but the group's essence is best described by Norman Ramirez Talavera. He's an intelligent, articulate man who reportedly got caught putting these words into the FBI's tape machine: "I will not be arrested. I am not going to permit anyone to take me abroad. They will have to take me dead. I won't be caught alive. I couldn't stand being out there."

These words describe the passion any Machetero has for his or her homeland. These people are nourished by contact with their native soil, and like Norman Ramirez, they fear the debilitating spiritual consequences of living abroad, in an alien world.

That's easy to understand and even easier to applaud. What makes Los Macheteros Public Enemy Number One is the group's tactics and revolutionary goals, which by the FBI's definition, merit the label terrorist. As the bureau sees it, Los Macheteros are neither patriots nor freedom fighters. They are brutes in search of a target, and they deserve no mercy because their terrorist tactics make them international pariahs. As one person suggested, the only homeland a terrorist deserves is a small cell on a deserted island.

That may be true. In a world otherwise full of differences, violent tactics breed consensus. Virtually everyone agrees that terrorism is inhuman, but in a world overflowing with contemptible governments, there is also a widespread consensus among even "establishment" figures that revolutionary violence is sometimes legitimate. President Reagan not only funds the Contra effort in Nicaragua, he calls those "soldiers" freedom fighters. And Menachem Begin, the former prime minister of Israel,

wrote that "substantial quantities of explosives were the main weapon in the struggle for liberation."

If violence is sometimes a legitimate revolutionary tool, a definition of terrorism is essential. Otherwise brutes and patriots get placed in the same inhuman category, and blinded by the terrorist label, interested observers miss the possibly legitimate reasons for revolutionary violence.

A good definition of terrorism is found in *Terrorism: How The West Can Win* (edited by Benjamin Netanyahu). Published in 1986, this volume arguably has a conservative bias (it includes, for example, essays by Secretary of State George Shultz, former United States American Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, and FBI Director William Webster*), but it does offer an accurate and widely accepted analysis of what terrorism is.

"Civilians are the key to the terrorists' strategy." Men, women, children, the handicapped, no one is excluded. "What distinguishes terrorism is the *willful* and *calculated* choice of innocents as targets." A guerrilla is not a terrorist, because "guerrillas pit themselves against far superior combatants." But terrorists aim for "anybody except soldiers," and they do so with a specific goal in mind: fear. Terrorists try to scare their opponents into submission. To summarize: "Terrorism is the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends."[3]

By that definition, Los Macheteros are definitely not terrorists. Rather than fear, they aim to create courage and pride; they're trying to arouse the Puerto Rican people, not scare them. And, far more important, the activities of Los Macheteros show no evidence of any deliberate and calculated effort to attack either American or Puerto Rican civilians. Indeed, if as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan notes, "Terrorism denies the distinction between state and society, public and private, government and the individual," Los Macheteros deliberately and calculatedly underline that distinction by attacking soldiers, firing on government buildings, and blowing up military aircraft.

Los Macheteros are revolutionaries, and any overall assessment of their activities depends on, first, the acceptance or rejection of violence as a means of social protest; and, second, the perceived legitimacy of their historical case.

*The definition that Webster provides in his essay in *Terrorism: How The West Can Win* bears no resemblance to the one he uses when appearing before congressional committees.

Let's begin with the legitimacy of violence, because the use of force is a defining characteristic of virtually almost all Macheteros actions; and because, even if violent revolutionary acts are necessary, they must have a higher justification than the one I sometimes heard on the streets: "If it's alright for the presidents of the United States to terminate people [for example, Patrice Lumumba in Zaire or the many attempts on Castro's life], why can't Los Macheteros?"

Imitating an American president's brutality is never a sufficient justification for murder, especially that of the two sailors at Sebana Seca or the one sailor in the harbor at Old San Juan. If such acts are ever to be justified, the revolutionary must come to terms with the universal dilemma—the "terrible problem"—posed by Albert Camus in *The Rebel.* In that book, revolutionary murder is described as "necessary and inexcusable." Necessary because, as in Puerto Rico, terrible injustices exist. And inexcusable because to kill others is to become an ultimate arbiter of human destiny—a god—and to forget "the limits at which the community of man is established." Terrorism is so widely and rightly abhorred precisely because it breaks down the barriers between combatants and noncombatants, civilians and soldiers, the guilty and the innocent.

Fully cognizant of the terrible moral dilemma murder poses, Camus also argues that most people ignore it. "In the name of formal principles" (for example, the rule of law), they deny the legitimacy of violence but "then sanction that diffuse form of violence which takes place on the scale of world history." Or in the name of an absolute end, "they add murder to murder, to the point of making history nothing but a continuous violation of everything in man which protests against injustice."

Because he refuses to be a god but still wishes to eliminate injustice, Camus's rebel lives, as we do, in a world where contradictions thrive. He believes that murder is always ultimately inexcusable but still sometimes historically necessary. That's an unresolvable contradiction that, applied to Sebana Seca, leads me to conclude that Los Macheteros committed an act that cannot be justified. Recall that the firing on the bus was in retaliation for the murder of Angel Rodriguez in a Tallahassee prison. If Los Macheteros had killed the people who had killed Angel, then I

believe one could call their action, however ultimately inexcusable, historically necessary. But despite wearing American uniforms, the people on that bus were not guilty of any specific injustice. They were simply Americans in uniform in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their deaths were not so much necessary as possible. And having an accessible target is never a justification for murder.

If we move from the deaths at Sebana Seca (and in Old San Juan harbor) to an act like the destruction of the planes at Muñoz Airport, it is much easier to find the assaults, if not acceptable, at least necessary. The rebel seeks to eliminate injustice, and if in the name of formal principles (such as the international laws that legitimated the American invasion and takeover of Puerto Rico), rebels are denied the right to meet force with force, then they are simply being asked to peacefully accept their own servitude. No Machetero will do that because, in contrast to my reasoning, they find the deaths at Sebana Seca terrible but necessary; and in addition to the ultimate justification provided by Camus, they also find a historical basis for their often violent actions. One Machetero, suggesting that Americans sometimes forget their revolutionary roots, told me to consider the *Gaspee* incident. I didn't know what he was talking about until I read an account of the episode in Lawrence Gipson's *The Coming of the Revolution.*

In 1771, a British vessel, the *Gaspee,* was zealously collecting taxes the colonists refused to pay. The Americans said the king lacked legitimate authority to require such taxes, and in protest, a number of Rhode Island men "boarded the vessel and burned it after wounding its commander by gunfire and overpowering its crew." The British immediately sought to apprehend "the culprits," but "even though the guilty parties were Providence men of great prominence who had acted openly in organizing the expedition and who had boarded the ship without disguise, they were so well shielded both by their fellow citizens and by the government of the colony that no evidence could be obtained against them."[4]

My independentista informant says there's a close parallel between the *Gaspee* affair and the destruction of the National Guard planes, and between the Boston Tea Party and the Wells Fargo robbery. In each case, a small minority used extremist tactics, and in each case, a large body of citizens applauded the violent challenges to colonial authority. Indeed, since American

history books still celebrate the Boston Tea Party, my informant argues that Macheteros should be allowed to brag about Wells Fargo. At least the colonists had begun as willing subjects of the British crown. Since Puerto Ricans had been conquered, in the eyes of the independentistas they deserve even more leeway than the "Mohawks" who dropped private property into Boston harbor.

That's hard for many Americans to accept. But the position of Los Macheteros is based on more than purely political issues. In calling the robbery an "expropriation," Los Macheteros argue that Americans have exploited the Puerto Rican people. Starting in 1898, Americans had made big, big bucks on the island, and Los Macheteros are simply taking back what rightfully belongs to the Puerto Rican people.

Wells Fargo understandably has trouble with that concept. Somehow Victor's behavior still seems like a robbery when they look at their empty vaults. But no matter what label one attaches to the $7 million haul, the island economy is a key political issue for at least three reasons.

First, it may be the best chance of success for Los Macheteros. One cynical line of reasoning says to forget about pride and culture. Just let the extremely weak economy collapse, and Los Macheteros can then pick up the pieces.

Second, the Puerto Rican economy is totally based on American political policies and practices. In the 1950s, Congress said the society, and especially the economy, was the showcase of the Caribbean, and today Congress holds that economy up with eight times more food stamps than for any state in the Union. In good times and bad, the bottom line is the same: The Puerto Rican economy is a congressional creation.

Finally, the economy is central to the program of Los Macheteros and the Wells Fargo robbery. It was, in fact, his people's poverty that moved Victor Gerena to action—and a major reason Victor "did it."

NOTES

1. Rene Marques, *El Puertorriqueno Docil y otras ensayos* (San Juan: Editorial Antillana), 1971.
2. FBI Oversight and Authorization, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, February 2, 1983 (Washington, D.C.), especially 60–61.
3. Benjamin Netanyahu, editor, *Terrorism: How The West Can Win* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1986), 7–15, especially 9.
4. Lawrence Gipson, *The Coming of the Revolution* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1954), 208–209; see also Pauline Maier, *From Resistance To Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), especially 11–15.

9

Broken Bootstraps

MOST IMMIGRANTS came to the United States by boat. Irish and Italian, German and Polish, English and Swedish, they boarded a ship, endured a cramped crossing, and, after they landed in the New World, largely severed their ties with the "old country." Some did return, but the vast majority of early newcomers made migration a one-way voyage.

Puerto Ricans are different. Twenty-five years after the United States essentially closed its doors to immigration in 1924, they came by plane, already American citizens. They could return home, for a relatively small fare, whenever they pleased. Even during the banner years of Puerto Rican migration, the numbers show almost as many people leaving the States as arriving. In 1962, for example, 807,549 islanders came, but 796,186 went home. In 1970, 1.49 million islanders boarded planes bound for the States as 1.48 million returned to Puerto Rico.[1]

It's a revolving door that, with each turn, lures home the Puerto Ricans who find on the mainland none of the riches they sought. Islanders came because, with the approval of Congress, their government pushed them out with promises of good jobs and high wages. For Puerto Rico's economic planners, the northeast corridor was a lovely spot to deposit the island's excess population, but for the people who moved, the good dream seldom became a pleasing reality.

When immigrants came by boat, the United States still had a wealth of jobs for unskilled foreigners. You got low wages and you experienced prejudice, but the ladder of success still had a rung for the unskilled and uneducated.

When immigrants came by jet, the menial jobs were also in flight—to Taiwan, to Singapore, and to Hong Kong. The economic strategy named Operation Bootstrap booted out its own at a time when the United States offered fewer and fewer opportunities for people without skills and degrees. In 1900, this was an industrial society. Today it is a technological one. When they

can't find work, many Puerto Ricans quickly draw this conclusion: I'd rather be poor at home than in a foreign country.

The Puerto Ricans who stay are, except for Native Americans, the poorest ethnic group in the United States. Almost 43 percent of islanders live at or below the poverty level (the figure for blacks is 34 percent, for whites, 11 percent). Their labor participation rate—65.9 percent—is the lowest of all Hispanic groups, and in more than 45 percent of the cases, a Puerto Rican family is headed by a woman.[2]

It's a harsh reality, which has, besides the absence of unskilled jobs, a number of causes. For example, because many Puerto Ricans are dark-skinned, they get a double dose of prejudice the moment they get off the plane. At home nobody notices. In the States, everybody does; added to the label "spic" is the word "nigger." It makes some people stand up and fight, but it fills others with scars and hate. As Piri Thomas put it in *Down These Mean Streets,* "I hate the paddy who's trying to keep the black man down. But I'm beginning to hate the black man too, cause I can feel his pain and I don't know that it oughtta be mine. Shit man, Puerto Ricans got social problems too. Why the fuck we gotta take on the Negroes too?"[3]

Mainland Puerto Ricans are poor. And like Victor Gerena, they are often angry because poverty is not what Congress promised. Indeed, all many islanders remember is that once the island's industrialization began in earnest, one set of government ads lured Puerto Ricans to New York with promises of work, while another set of government ads lured Americans to the island with promises of "Profitland U.S.A." Let businessmen come to the sun-drenched shores of Puerto Rico. They could soak up some cash because the labor was cheap, the people docile, and businessmen paid no federal taxes.

That would have been great, if everybody had shared in the wealth, which they didn't. In fact, forty years into its industrialization program, Puerto Rico's unemployment rate has doubled, the economy would collapse without its $5 billion a year federal fix, and no matter how bad the economy gets, islanders continue to import (per capita) more American goods than anyone else on earth.[4]

His friends say that Victor sometimes attributed Puerto Rico's poverty to greedy industrialists. And they're certainly a factor. But the economic story is far more complicated than

that, because long before industrialization occurred, and long before economic planners pushed migrants like Victor's parents to the mainland, Puerto Rico was already nothing more than a third-world supply region. Industrialization did create the mainland conditions that helped make Victor a revolutionary, but the island's economy has always been inherently crippled because (as a supply region) its production for others has always overwhelmingly outweighed production for itself. For example, whether supplying coffee to the Spanish or sugar to the Americans, Puerto Rico's economic well-being revolved around the buying habits of outsiders. Profits and jobs existed when customers bought the one or two crops islanders sold; when they did not (for example, when the Spanish stopped buying Puerto Rican coffee after the American invasion), the economy would enter a depression. And it would stay there until outsiders resumed their purchases.

Some supply regions exist "by accident." Kuwait and oil come immediately to mind. But far more often, supply regions have been created by the imperial powers who conquered other nations. One country used another to obtain a particular commodity, and by means of military, political, and economic power, imperialists also used supply regions as captive markets for their manufactured and agricultural products.

As it exists today, Puerto Rico is a supply region created by and for the United States. An island that (in 1896) sent 18 percent of its exports to the U.S. had increased that amount to 85 percent by 1910. And while 24 percent of its imports were American in 1896, by 1910 Puerto Rico bought more than 85 percent of its imports from the United States.[5]

Businessmen came to Puerto Rico to make a buck. They saw an opportunity for investments, they made them (in sugar, clothing, or, today, pharmaceuticals), and they did so without any long-range plan for the island's economic development. In theory this was not only acceptable but praiseworthy, because investment created wealth that would presumably be available to all islanders. In reality growth without development has been an economic catastrophe. Americans and Puerto Ricans failed to remember that capital is never an end in itself but is always a means to the creation of more wealth. American businesspeople come to make money. And if, for whatever reason, they can no longer

do so, they sell their land or factories and take their accumulated wealth elsewhere.

Investors leave not because they are inherently rapacious people. They leave because they want to earn profits. That's what a capitalist is supposed to do, and if economic theorists argue that profits eventually trickle down—instead of over and out—investors would suggest they analyze the motives for investment, the role of a supply region, and the awesome power of ownership.

To look at Puerto Rico's economy is to understand that, however well-intentioned some Americans were, they invested where it suited *their* economic interests, and when Puerto Rican profits were no longer sufficient, investors exercised the key privilege attached to private property: They took their capital elsewhere, leaving Puerto Rico a graveyard of past "profit centers."[6]

The Puerto Rican economy is a disaster area. And to understand why, the place to begin is with King Sugar.

When Americans first took over, they did not fundamentally change the agrarian nature of the island's economy. Before and after 1898, the vast majority of people worked the land. Largely due to American economic interests, instead of coffee, the new crop was sugar. Cane took over so quickly that from 15 percent of the cultivated land in 1899, sugar production claimed 44 percent of all cultivated acreage in 1930. Total yields rose from 72,000 tons in 1897 to 856,109 tons in 1930; and yield per acre skyrocketed from one ton in 1897 to three and a half tons in 1930. Everything looked rosy, until observers began to analyze the social consequences of sugar's domination.

First came the absentee American owners. Coffee was a poor person's crop, but to be profitable, sugar required large amounts of capital. Processing mills cost money, which American entrepreneurs willingly provided because Puerto Rico had everything a cautious investor wanted: political stability, tariff protection for the crop, and an excellent market in the United States. Sugar looked so good that by 1930, 60 percent of all cane cultivation was absentee controlled, "with virtually all of [that] control residing in the United States."[7]

Puerto Ricans got angry. To achieve economies of scale, the plantations got larger and larger, the smaller farmers lost any semblance of control over their destinies (for example, small cane growers sold their crops to absentee mill owners), and all the while, profits, instead of being reinvested on the island, went to

the United States. Capitalists claimed they had a right to a return on their investment, while islanders complained about the terrible consequences of becoming somebody else's supply region.

The acreage now devoted to sugar had traditionally provided pasture for the island's cattle industry or small plots for the jíbaros' production of vegetables and fruits. But as sugar took over, islanders became more and more dependent on the mother country's food imports. And—this is especially galling to nationalists—the same tariff that protected the price of the absentee owner's sugar increased the prices of the food commodities that now had to be imported.[8] Locked into the American tariff structure, Puerto Ricans were paying more to be far more dependent than ever before. For example, seventy days of an average worker's wages went to paying for essential imported foods in 1897; in 1930 it took 104 days, with fully 94 percent of total yearly income spent on the family's food supplies.

If sugar had produced jobs or decent wages or even full-time employment, critics might have seen some long-range benefits for the majority of people. But as machinery transformed the mills, laborers became unnecessary. One reliable study showed that despite the enormous increases in production, by 1920 employment in sugar had actually decreased. And those who did work found only seasonal employment, at wages that were "roughly one-half that of other tropical countries producing the same product."[9]

The management of sugar production produced great poverty and dependence. Similar problems occurred with tobacco. The acreage devoted to the tobacco crop grew from 6,000 to 30,000 between 1899 and 1930. In terms of percentage, that was greater growth than for sugar. But tobacco only reaffirmed Puerto Rico's role as a supply region. It is true that firms like American Tobacco did not try to gain control of the land. They didn't have to, because as long as absentee owners controlled the manufacture, distribution, and sale of cigars and cigarettes, farmers who grew tobacco were a captive audience. With no other place to dispose of their crops, they sold to the United States or not at all. By 1930 more than 90 percent of the Puerto Rican tobacco crop came to the United States.[10]

As the island entered the Depression, its two-crop economy was totally dependent on the attitudes and habits of Americans. Critics like governor-to-be Muñoz called the island "Uncle Sam's

second largest sweatshop,"[11] but as long as Puerto Rico remained politically subservient to the United States, it had no legal means of resisting the concerted demands of American investors. If islanders had controlled their own political destiny—for example, if Puerto Ricans had controlled taxation, established tariffs, and regulated shipping—they might have resisted the "concerted selectivity" of absentee owners. But since islanders lacked the right to shape economic policies, the demands of outside investors won out. From 1898 to 1932, nothing stopped American businesspeople from creating a society with economic specializations as narrow as outsiders demanded. As the Depression took hold, more than 75 percent of Puerto Rico's exports came from sugar and tobacco.[12]

But, and this is the kind of question President Coolidge asked, would things have been different without American investors? Indeed, would the Puerto Rican economy have grown at all if stateside capitalists had invested their funds elsewhere?

There are no sure answers to these questions. It seems doubtful that, with or without American political control, capitalists would have acted any less selectively. Investors sought profit, not a viable economy. And it is a fact that many native Puerto Ricans openly welcomed and eagerly profited from the new investments in sugar and tobacco. Just like the Americans, natives happily made money from the sweat of the jíbaro's labor, so it is possible to argue that even with independence Puerto Ricans would have exploited their own just as irresponsibly as the Americans did.

No one knows what might have happened. History tells us only what did happen, and in the case of Puerto Rico, it is indisputable that, based on their political and economic control, Americans bear primary responsibility for an economy as precarious and narrow as that of any "banana republic."

When the Depression hit, Puerto Rico quickly became what Senator Moynihan called "a scene of almost unrelieved misery." As the market for sugar and tobacco collapsed, an island with 67 percent of its jobs in agriculture experienced unemployment that soared to 65 percent of the labor force. All the while population increased dramatically—fully 21 percent between 1931 and 1935—and, as a final problem, complaints from American labor moved Congress to include Puerto Rico in the federal government's minimum wage law. The result was the collapse of a needlework industry employing more than 40,000 women. Before the law, garment makers had payed four cents an hour; when the law was enacted, they packed their carpetbags so quickly that in three years needlework exports dropped by 400 percent.[13]

Although New Dealers tried to help, their plans for land redistribution and public ownership of essential facilities met sharp and successful resistance from political conservatives on the island and in Washington. Since the radical changes needed to break the vicious circle of dependency were not made, Puerto Ricans entered the war years more tied to the American economy than ever before. In 1940, with more than 50 percent of the people jobless, more than 95 percent of Puerto Rico's exports came to the United States.

The war that revived America's economy did nothing to help Puerto Rico's. President Roosevelt declared a state of emergency in May 1940, and in towns like Hartford, the job market blossomed. But Puerto Rico had no war industries and a country surrounded by water found that it had less than a third of the ships it had before the United States went into the war. Food prices went through the roof, exports had no way to reach their market, and in the name of American national security, the Navy and Army commandeered some of Puerto Rico's best lands. Muñoz Marin, writing in the *New Republic,* complained that 90 percent of the island's population was on the verge of destitution, while Congress, agreeing with his assessment, blamed the economic problems on population growth and political incompetence. In a report entitled "Conditions in Puerto Rico," the Committee on Insular Affairs in 1945 noted that, in addition to economic distress, the liveliness of island politics had its roots "in the natural tendencies of people of Spanish origin for participation in fiestas, parades, and other such activities."[14]

Prejudice dies slowly. Supposedly intelligent people blamed poverty on Puerto Rican passions while Muñoz Marin, seeking a way out of his country's dilemma, decided to rely on still more American involvement. The immediate catalyst for his decision was yet another congressional report. This one, by the United States Tariff Commission, not only blamed Puerto Rico's problems on a growing population but also argued that islanders could never make it on their own. Even with American assistance, the future looked bleak, but without the nets provided by federal

funds, the 90 percent near drowning would certainly sink.

To the dismay of nationalists, Muñoz and his colleagues reluctantly accepted the catastrophic conclusions drawn by the Commission. Independentistas said the first step to a viable economy was political control of the island's affairs. How could anyone chart an economic course when someone else captained the ship? Muñoz saw the point, but with Congress unwilling to grant meaningful political or economic freedoms, Muñoz decided to work within the American colonial system. Nationalists wanted to fight, but Muñoz argued that even with a political victory, Puerto Ricans would suffer an economic defeat. Let the status issue be settled by the next generation. During the 1940s and 1950s, islanders had to devote all their energies and attention to a transformation of the Puerto Rican economy. Industry would bring prosperity even if the machines and capital came from the United States, and even if, as the example of the needlework industry showed, outsiders had no fundamental interests in the long-term viability of the Puerto Rican economy.

Muñoz Marin understood the problem* but he apparently thought he could solve it with Fomento—a government agency he established to oversee economic development—a plan called Operation Bootstrap, and, linking the two, a total commitment to the rapid industrialization of Puerto Rican society.

Perfectly titled to appeal to the American politicians who would support it and the American businessmen who would fund it, Operation Bootstrap tried to convert weaknesses into strengths, nature's bounty into a tourist's mecca.[15] If the island had exquisite beaches, let Americans lie on them as they poured Puerto Rican rum into their Coca Cola. And if Puerto Rico had too many people, advertise the work force as a potential source of cheap labor. The nationalists were right when they said that would only make the island a bigger sweatshop, but Muñoz promised that this time islanders would capitalize on the experience and profits generated by American absentee owners. Perhaps he would have to let "three hundred sons of bitches become millionaires in the process" but ultimately Puerto Ricans would take charge of their own economic (and in the next generation their own political) affairs.[16]

This would have made sense if Muñoz had had the power to

*It was he who called the island Uncle Sam's second largest sweatshop.

control the "sons of bitches" who would furnish the capital for Puerto Rico's industrialization. The trick for an underdeveloped island was to lure the capital while simultaneously making sure, first, that at least part of the profits were reinvested on the island, and, second, that all investments fit into a long-term strategy of economic development. Success depended upon having a developmental strategy and the ability to implement it, as well as an ability to change plans if social and economic conditions warranted new strategies for long-term development.

Operation Bootstrap began life fatally flawed primarily because Fomento's plan was based on Muñoz's willingness to work within the American system. Puerto Ricans could lobby and plead, but without the support of even one vote in Congress, Fomento's staff started out with sharply limited powers to determine, implement, and change their economic strategies.[17]

The tax exemption laws are still the heart and soul of Puerto Rico's ability to lure capital. First instituted in 1947, the legislation granted federal and local tax exemptions to corporations investing in Puerto Rico. The length of the exemption varied (it might be ten years near San Juan, thirty years for capital sent to Vieques), but all corporations received such substantial benefits that Fomento's planners quickly convinced executives that Puerto Rico was "Profitland U.S.A." With labor-intensive outfits like Playtex and Schick leading the way, more than one thousand manufacturing plants were built on the island between 1947 and 1965. Official unemployment dropped to 12.4 percent in the last quarter of 1959, and per capita income rose from $256 in 1948 to $500 ten years later.[18] Muñoz eagerly broadcast these "flattering statistics," and Congress echoed his boasts by calling Puerto Rico the "Showcase of the Caribbean."

Critics noted that even after ten years of dramatic growth, official unemployment still hit Depression levels, and far more important, the central failure of the economic plan was hidden by the export of excess labor. Between 1952 and 1960, net migration to the United States totaled more than four hundred thousand people.[19] Like Victor Gerena's parents in 1955, Puerto Ricans migrated because the island's boom did not affect them, and they stayed because, no matter how bad conditions were on the mainland, things looked worse on the island. As a recent study of migration shows, people came for two principal reasons: unemployment in Puerto Rico and higher wages in the United States.

Muñoz asked for a few more years to allow his plan to work, but no amount of time was enough if planners lacked power. Fomento had originally argued that the tax incentive program would be phased out by 1962. In that year the booming economy would no longer require so many generous lures. Puerto Rico would be self-sustaining because American businessmen would have reinvested their profits and, as they did so, islanders would have replaced a substantial number of imports with local production.

It was a plausible if overly optimistic prediction. The rub was the financial behavior of the new businesses. They were supposed to reinvest their profits because the law said that dividends paid by an island subsidiary to an American parent corporation were taxable—unless, after ten years, you dissolved the subsidiary. What corporations did was to take their earnings and invest them not in Puerto Rico but in Europe or in tax-exempt banks on another American possession, "the petty reef of Guam." Thus no matter how hard Fomento's planners tried, they were unable to control short-term investment or long-term development. As the Treasury Department noted, 62 of 103 operations closed their doors the day their tax exemption expired. (Remember: After ten years, dividends could be repatriated with no federal taxes due.)[20]

Instead of reinvestment, Fomento found itself with a decided need for new investment. It couldn't control the tax laws, which had to be extended in 1963. It couldn't replace imports with local production, because the new businesses and the old tariffs ruled out the commercial linkages that would have made the island less dependent on the United States. Studies showed that "the general practice of many U.S. corporations was to use Puerto Rico only as a production point."[21] Raw materials and intermediate goods were shipped to the island subsidiary by its American parent, natives manufactured the bras, razors, or shoes, and the finished goods were then shipped to the mainland. Few Puerto Ricans got to be part of the pre- or postproduction process, and in a perverse but common pattern, islanders found they were unable to immediately buy what they produced. For example, shoes manufactured in Ponce were sent to the United States, before they would be offered for sale on the island. Puerto Ricans had to pay prices that reflected the costs of production and the costs of shipment to the mainland and back.

Nationalists understandably fumed, but even if the corporations had been willing to help, Fomento's staff was stuck with trade laws that offered little incentive to locals. From a Puerto Rican's perspective, why invest in a fledgling industry if the government was unable to protect local production from competition that could easily outmaneuver any young island enterprise? And as if it wasn't hard enough to help neophytes, Fomento also had to resist the American assault on established local businesses. For example, at one point locals had controlled 95 percent of the beer market. But American breweries saw an opportunity; and able to afford a heavy barrage of sophisticated advertising, Budweiser, Schaefer, and Miller today dominate the Puerto Rican market. How, local beer manufacturers asked, can we successfully compete with efficient representatives of the world's most powerful economy without protection?[22]

For the destruction of Puerto Rican agriculture, primary blame must be shared by Muñoz and his colleagues. In the face of a growing population, they deemphasized agriculture to such an extent that the farm work force was nearly cut in half by 1960. When people came to the cities, most were unable to find work, and in the countryside, instead of bearing crops, nearly 60 percent of the land fell into disuse.[23] The result was an enormously increased reliance on imports of food from the United States. Much of the rice that is a staple of the Puerto Rican diet comes from California, and the pork served with the rice is nurtured on the imported feed that costs Puerto Ricans roughly $40 more a ton than it costs Americans.

By the early 1960s, analysts rightly complained that Operation Bootstrap had made islanders even more dependent on the United States.[24] It is true that the economy had been transformed—factories literally dotted the island—but on a fundamental level, the only change was that Puerto Rico, once an agricultural supply region, could now be called an industrialized supply region. Instead of growing sugar and tobacco on the land, it now manufactured bras and shavers behind concrete walls, but either way, if anything happened on the mainland, the colony could quickly suffer economic disaster.

It all depended on the United States, which, throughout the 1960s, did a great deal to postpone the inevitable. Seeing an opportunity in oil, Congress issued in 1965 a special proclamation to develop a petrochemical industry in the Common-

wealth. The island would be exempted from foreign import quotas, and using the then cheaper oil from Venezuela and Saudi Arabia,* Puerto Rico could quickly establish a booming oil business. Its gas would be cheap and, over time, petroleum profits would be used to spin off an array of labor-intensive satellite industries. Nylon, plastics, polyester—every oil-based business would flock to the island to take advantage of the much cheaper oil.

All sides quickly saw the distinct advantages this plan offered. Oil companies got tax exemptions, political stability, relatively cheap labor, and inexpensive petrochemical products. No investor could ask for much more. The island got new industries, increased investments, and earnings and employment opportunities for its population. Everybody except the nationalists cheered on the oil interests. Phillips Petroleum, Union Carbide, and Sun Oil quickly invested more than $1.5 billion in petroleum facilities. It was true that all that investment translated into a barely visible 7,200 jobs—refineries rely on machines, not people—but downstream, when all those nylon businesses set up shop, Puerto Ricans would finally get what they most needed: employment.

This never happened because the island's political and economic vulnerability left it wide open to a (perhaps predictable) double whammy. First came the oil crisis. When OPEC decided to capitalize on its ownership of an essential commodity, the United States reacted by deciding to control domestic oil prices *below* the price of imported oil. Puerto Rico, yesterday in an enviable position, suddenly found that its products were no longer competitive. Within two years, prices increased by multiples of four and five as Puerto Rico watched its parent government help OPEC kill its fledgling oil industry.

As a consequence, investors did what any good capitalists would: They canceled plans for new investment and eventually closed their operations. Wherever possible, investors got their money back in clever ways—entire refinery facilities were floated over to Haiti—but the most common response has been to let the refineries rust. In Guayanilla, outside of Ponce, I stopped counting after one hundred smokestacks: The landscape seems to contain nothing else. Exit the main highway and within

*By one reliable estimate, it costs the Saudis forty cents to extract a barrel of oil from the ground.

seconds you enter an industrial desert. Fences, some on their way down, try to block off the ugliness, but it's impossible to stop the rains that turn gray smokestacks into rusting brown towers.

The oil facilities are dead, killed by political policies that make Puerto Rico a low American priority and by economic interests that, by definition, must put profits ahead of a people's long-term development.

A postscript: When Americans remember the oil crisis, we usually point fingers at "those greedy Arabs." In Puerto Rico's case, before the crisis the island got 75 percent of its oil from Venezuela, the country that often champions its case for independence in the United Nations. When it came to raising prices, however, islanders got treated just like everybody else. Hispanic brotherhood ended on the oil lines.[25]

The fate of the oil industry in Puerto Rico symbolizes the futility of trying to build a viable economy without political control and a long-range development plan. Throughout the 1960s, Operation Bootstrap produced flattering statistics and increased unemployment. Fomento planners took what they could get (which turned out to be petrochemicals), while Congress provided safety nets that hid the failure few people were willing to admit. From 1951 to 1968 federal grants-in-aid climbed from 10 to 23 percent of the island government's budget and total federal outlays increased from $122 to $470 million. The roots of the food-stamp fix go back to Great Society programs that pumped $93 million into the economy in 1964 and $186 million three years later.[26]

Nobody said so publicly, but Puerto Rico was on the American dole. And nationalists, who had no trouble with government assistance, did criticize programs that, first, made the island even more dependent on Washington, and, second, did nothing to eliminate the structural weaknesses that made so much federal assistance necessary. As one critic suggested, provide money, but don't let politicians use it to pad government payrolls and postpone real attempts to deal with underlying problems.[27]

As long as no serious economic dislocations occurred, federal bandages kept disaster at bay. But once the American economy got into trouble that quickly became compounded by the oil crisis, nothing could prevent Puerto Rico's "Great Crash." Official unemployment almost doubled from 1970 to 1976 (from 10.7

to 19.5 percent of the labor force), and besides the losses in petrochemicals, traditional mainstays like companies in the apparel industry also began to close up shop. Island wages were still 30 percent lower than those in the United States, but when Asians would work for fifty cents an hour, Puerto Ricans got left, not out in the cold, but in the hot Caribbean sun. Thirty percent of American imports of clothing in 1965 had originated in Puerto Rico, 14 percent in Hong Kong, 1 percent in Korea, and 2 percent in Taiwan. By 1976, Puerto Rico's share had fallen to 9 percent, and the share of Hong Kong had risen to 32 percent, that of Korea to 17 percent, and that of Taiwan to 16 percent.[28]

Led by a Republican president, the United States responded with astonishing increases in federal assistance. Between 1970 and 1975, total aid increased from $455 million to $1.4 billion. Much more revealing, net transfer payments (for example, food stamps) increased from $80 million to $599 million—a 649 percent increase in five years. If those payments kept the island's economy going, they also institutionalized practices that soon made the island more dependent on the United States than ever before.[29]

The food stamps sent by the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford set in motion, without the consent of the governed, "the largest single program to affect the character of Puerto Rico since it became an American possession." Because more than 70 percent of the island's inhabitants—some two million people—qualified for the stamps under mainland poverty standards, the Puerto Rican program soon absorbed 10 to 12 percent of the total national food stamp program. "Single distribution centers handled more clients than the entire state of Texas," with an economic impact that utterly infuriates many hardworking Puerto Ricans.[30]

The stamps provide a disincentive to work. *"Los cupones* [the food stamps]," said one man in an angry voice, "have the same effect as the noonday sun; they make you want to lie down and rest." In the mountain town of Jayuya, the welcoming sign boasts a big red tomato and proudly states that Jayuya is the tomato capital of the world. But as Celso Naranez, an incredibly hardworking, very dignified man told me, "You can't get people to plant or pick." They get more money from los cupones. Now, in the tomato capital of the world, the boxes of red, juicy vegetables are stamped "Grown in the Dominican Republic."

Nationalists hate the stamps. They put people to sleep, and even if they didn't, they solve no basic economic problems. If the island produced its own food, the stamps might have a ripple effect. But since the island does not produce what its people need, the increase in the effective demand for goods creates few local jobs, except for the dockworkers and truckers who unload and haul what is made in the United States and, increasingly, Japan.

To travel over and through the island is to witness the complete victory of Toyota, Honda, and Suzuki. In Jayuya, with more than 80 percent of the people unemployed, driveway after driveway sports a new automobile in front of a house that is often receiving major improvements. This phenomenon, which is seen from one end of the island to the other, is totally baffling until the observer understands the bankers' use of los cupones.

Because merchants used the banks as a channel for the conversion of food stamps into real money, bankers found themselves with $800 million a year of costless, risk free, government money. As a conduit for the funds, the banks paid no interest, but they still had the loot, and they used it to finance substantially increased consumer demand. The banks lent the food stamp money to finance companies, who lent the food stamp monies back to the people who were the original source. All the while, the banks made money, the finance companies made money, Japan sold cars paid for with federal funds, and the Puerto Rican people established an underground economy to help pay for the cars, furniture, appliances, and house repairs fueled by the food stamp (and other federal) funds.

After all, to continue getting the stamps, which paid for the purchases, people had to keep their official incomes below the poverty line. Islanders developed a variety of informal arrangements that brought in "under the table" cash. At below minimum wage, laborers, masons, and electricians worked on projects like home building—often financed by the United States' Farmers Home Administration—to maintain the life-style made possible by the bankers' quick-witted use of monies from the food stamp program. A vicious circle resulted: As workers went underground to keep below the poverty level but also to keep up with their car or refrigerator payments, they soon had to go deeper underground to finance additional purchases financed by the banks' continued use of food stamp funds.

On the surface the island looks prosperous. In reality, the economy is as strong as any set of dykes filled in, not with fingers, but with federal funds.[31]

In response to the island's economic woes, the leader of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, Carlos Romero Barcelo, openly championed a platform called Statehood Is for the Poor; this at least got him votes, but unable to offer anything as attractive as the food stamp program, Fomento's personnel felt they had no alternative to accepting whatever business replacements they could get.

In came more capital-intensive pharmaceutical houses like Searle and out went any chance of work for the masses of people. As *Fortune* magazine summed it up in 1979, "The island's emergence as a major manufacturing center for the drug industry has created only 9,200 jobs at a cost, in foregone taxes, of almost $35,000 per employee."[32]

With statehooders and Populares in charge of the island's government, officials chose to walk into the future by repeating the past. Politicians in search of votes hired so many new people that by 1980 fully 35 percent of the work force was employed by the government (the 1976 figure was 23 percent, the 1970 figure, 15.4 percent). And as a way to lure more businesses to the island, local politicians lobbied in Washington for dramatic changes in the original tax-incentive legislation.

Floored by the American recession, the oil crisis, cheaper wages abroad, lower American tariffs for foreign imports, and lower American corporate taxes, Puerto Rico no longer offered an inviting prospect for investors. With the activities of groups like Los Macheteros getting more and more publicity, even political stability was no longer guaranteed. In an effort to revitalize "Profitland U.S.A.," island politicians asked for changes that would "accelerate the repatriation of earnings." A possessions corporation* could send home all the money it wanted as soon as it wished. Profits didn't have to stay in Puerto Rico (or Guam), but in an attempt to control the abuses that had so far stopped

*The Treasury Department gives significant tax breaks to corporations that operate on possessions of the United States, e.g., Puerto Rico or Guam. To qualify for possessions corporation status a firm must derive at least 80 percent of its gross income from the possession and 65 percent of its income from the active conduct of a trade or business during the three years ending with the current tax year.

substantial reinvestment in Puerto Rico, the new tax laws offered incentives to those firms putting money into the island's economy.

In the past, the tax laws had exempted all income of possessions corporations that was not generated in the United States; it had been perfectly legal to take the profits made in Puerto Rico, invest them in Europe, and, ten years later bring everything home tax free. Now (after the Section 936 legislation enacted in 1976), possessions corporations got a tax exemption only on income connected with the business and on income generated by investments in the American possession where the business was located. Take your Puerto Rican profits to Europe or Guam and you paid a tax. Keep them on the island and the money you made was virtually tax free.

To get this legislation, island politicians knowingly paid a huge price. They expected firms to send profits back immediately, and they were not disappointed. In 1978 alone, possessions corporations distributed dividends totaling $1.5 billion. This money did pay a tollgate tax before it came to the States—in 1978 the tax was $49 million or roughly 3.5 percent of total profits returned[33]—but in order to control investment, statehooders and Populares believed they had to decontrol profit taking. Beggars could not be choosy.

Theoretically, the new laws should have worked. Even with the large dividends coming home, at the end of 1981 possessions corporations had made *financial* investments in the island that amounted to $7.6 billion. Since the Treasury Department said that the equivalent on the scale of the American economy would exceed $500 billion, by anybody's standards the revitalization monies existed.[34] The question was whether financial investments would be translated into capital investments. Did the money sit in banks, get reinvested elsewhere, or get used to build factories and reestablish agriculture?

After a thorough analysis, based on its legal right to check businesses' and bankers' accounts, the United States Treasury Department concluded in 1983 that the $7.6 billion was "hardly visible" in the island's net capital balance. And in a follow-up study completed in July 1985, Treasury argued that present private investment in plant and equipment was roughly half the level of ten years earlier. Using a wide variety of loopholes, the American banks (Chase and Citibank) who controlled most of the

deposits had easily avoided any substantial increases in their Puerto Rican capital investments. The Treasury Department also showed that in an "unpatriotic" move that infuriates many nationalists, the new investment money going into Puerto Rican banks and the island's publicly owned corporations had been taking the old route to Europe. Some of it had even gone to American banks because investors decided that they could make more money playing the markets abroad than playing by the spirit of the law at home.[35]

Further antagonizing the nationalists, the latest figures on profits show that possessions corporations still do extremely well. In the 1983 Treasury study, the before-tax return on operating assets was 52.3 percent for island operations, compared to 12.7 percent for manufacturing operations in the United States. And taking net operating income in relation to the number of employees, profits were six times greater in possessions corporations overall and ten times greater in the areas receiving the most new money, that is, in the drug industry.[36]

Trying to figure out why Puerto Rican subsidiaries were so much more profitable than their American counterparts, the Treasury survey showed that in many instances possessions corporations operate in buildings owned by the Puerto Rican people. Thus the factor of lower overhead costs accounts for part of the profit differential. So does a transfer device that should anger both Puerto Rican nationalists and American conservatives. American corporations sometimes transfer ownership of "intangibles" to their Puerto Rican subsidiaries. Income from drug patents or corporate trademarks is channeled—some would say laundered—on the island and thus incurs no island and no federal taxation. A paper transaction gives possessions corporations an advantage enjoyed by few of their mainland competitors.[37]

Despite the huge profits, official unemployment now exceeds 20 percent of the labor force. And since unofficial estimates place the real rate at 30 percent or better, the federal government has continued to provide the nets that keep the economy "on its feet." In 1978 Washington sent $2.5 billion in grants and transfer payments to the island, and in 1980 the figure was $3.1 billion. Ronald Reagan used to argue that this was a prime example of government spending gone wild, but for all the talk of budget cuts, his administration has maintained the level of funds available for direct payments to individuals (it was $2.3 billion in 1981,

$2.4 billion in 1984); and overall, the Reagan administration has substantially increased federal expenditures on the island. From $4.1 billion in 1981, the figure in 1984 was $5.4 billion.[38] The major consequence of so much federal spending is to indefinitely postpone any chance of dealing with reality. In 1986 the labor force participation rate was 43 percent (it was 53 percent in 1959); fully 40 percent of those who work are employed by the government (recall that the 1970 figure was 15.4 percent, the 1976 total 23 percent); and federal transfers account for one-third of the Commonwealth's budget (without taking into account direct subsidies to corporations). Since 1975, these transfers have exceeded the amount of profits made by American corporations.

Theoretically this is impossible. How can the balance of "value flows" (that is, money) be in Puerto Rico's favor? How can the mainland be giving more to the colony than the colony gives back? The answer is petrification. Nobody wants to address the structural and political issues that move the economy backward. Instead of dealing with reality, the leaders of both countries continue to advocate policies that are frozen in time. No matter what party or person controls the White House, the United States substantially increases the support payments that do nothing to solve basic economic problems. And despite thirty-five years of living with Operation Bootstrap, Puerto Rican planners propose more of the same.

Witness the 1984 program advocated by Puerto Rico's Planning Board and the United States Department of Commerce. The Planning Board offers an economic strategy rooted in the need to actively promote emigration and actively discourage return migration. Since this failed notion is already two generations old, the situation in the United States is well known. Mainland Puerto Ricans are, except for Native Americans, the poorest Americans. To help their own, the best the Planning Board can do is send more islanders to a city like New York, even though solid studies show that there is no reason to expect that they will have better lives there.

Another Planning Board suggestion is to bring in the Marines. Fill the island with factories making military goods, and people will finally find the employment they seek. On Vieques the Navy brought in the Dandie Corporation, and Viequesans now manufacture military shirts. This kind of investment will supposedly solve basic development problems.

Nothing could be further from the truth, since relying on military procurement will only make islanders even more dependent on Washington than they are now. For example, the history of an arms manufacturer like United Technologies (in recent years number two or three on the Pentagon's list of major contractors) is the history of a company desperately seeking to escape its reliance on the ups and downs of military procurement. Corporations wisely seek to avoid entanglements with the partner the Planning Board wants to embrace, because executives understand that buying into a roller coaster market offers no hope of long-range growth, stability, and prosperity.

Besides, even if the contracts and factories are obtained, military production is fundamentally a "transaction of decline." It can offer little if any assistance with Puerto Rico's main economic problem: replacing imports with labor-intensive industries that furnish a springboard for commercial development. As in Vieques, all that islanders will get from the military are projects that provide jobs based on Washington's willingness to pay and the military's need to avoid social and political unrest.[39]

Thirty-five years after Operation Bootstrap began, the economy's prospects are bleaker than ever. The generation that was supposed to finally decide the status issue focuses its attention on day-to-day survival. In 1981 the statehood governor Carlos Romero Barcelo called Puerto Rico an example of "candy-coated colonialism." And even in bad times, many American businesses do well. This small island still accounts for 42 percent of all American profits made in South and Central America.

Puerto Rico is a showcase. But in the 1980s, nobody's bragging about America's colonial achievements, either there or here. Recall that mainland Puerto Ricans are among the poorest Americans and that their mass migration occurred as a direct result of the congressionally engineered Operation Bootstrap.

Victor Gerena is the child of two parents who migrated at the height of the federally sponsored exodus. As we now try to unravel the many factors that made Victor a revolutionary, this much already seems clear: The Wells Fargo robbery is an example of colonial problems coming home to roost.

NOTES

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10

Victor Gerena: Growing Up Puerto Rican

AFTER A WHILE it got to be a joke. I knew it was coming so I'd just lay in wait, making personal bets on when this person would blurt out their variation of: "And you should see his eyes. Those green eyes. They're really something."

Every now and then a person would prove me wrong. They'd forget to mention Victor's "dancing eyes." But I got the comment so often, and not just from the women, that I'd look at the color photographs of him trying to grasp what caught so many people's attention. The color had to be part of it—green is out of the ordinary—but I soon decided that the real drawing card was Victor's personality. Eyes, after all, were still only one part of a face, attached to a body, controlled by a mind. Victor used his eyes to let people inside, and when friends said, "Those green eyes!" what they were actually recounting was a set of pleasant memories: his sense of humor, his capacity for fun, his concern for others. "You should have seen him with my kids," said one woman. "He cared for them. He was so special to them. He really loved them. And I'll always remember that. He was just great."

Or this from a friend who often "cruised" with the teenage Victor: "We always scored when I was with him, man. The girls really went for Victor. Maybe it was the eyes."

This same man was also a revolutionary, a guy so disciplined and determined that, for eighteen months, he made his eyes seem dull. Jimmy McKeon describes a man who often said nothing, not a word, for hours at a stretch. And then one night the guy walks off with $7 million.

Not bad. And not easy for a twenty-five-year-old man with such expressive eyes. On Hartford's streets, wags say Victor had "steel balls." What he also had was a deep commitment to the cause of Puerto Rican independence.

The discipline had always been there. Teachers applauded it

all through high school. What has to be explained is why a man who had made only two short trips to Puerto Rico decided to risk his life for the homeland. Why link his iron determination to revolution when, all through his life, people had offered Victor one legitimate opportunity after another.

Victor Gerena was a Puerto Rican most likely to succeed. But, except for Los Macheteros, nobody ever thought he'd opt for a Ph.D. in radical social change.

Victor Gerena was born on June 28, 1958, in the Bronx. His mother and father (both recent immigrants from the island) had met there, married when Gloria Ortiz was nineteen years old, and in short order, had five children: Victor, the eldest, his three brothers, and his sister.*

By all accounts, Victor Gerena, Sr., is a hardworking, responsible, concerned father. He has had the same job—as a painter—for more than twenty-five years, and he has always taken an active interest in his children's lives. Despite his father's admirable qualities, Victor told friend after friend that he and his father did not get along. That's not especially unusual, except that the way Victor related it to friends, his father always put him down. The man had a temper, and if he'd had a drink or two, Victor, Sr., could be especially caustic to his namesake, who, as a result of the verbal assaults, always "felt he had to do something big because of the nasty way his father had treated him."

Although that exact quote is from a close woman friend of Victor's, it was made after the robbery occurred. Once Victor became a celebrity, many people started to analyze his personality and his past. Whether correctly or incorrectly, Victor felt his father had always been unjustly critical of him. And Victor did strive to show his dad how wrong he had been. But *how* Victor would prove his point was always an open question, and, even more important, as a Puerto Rican father Victor, Sr., was always second in command. On the island but even more so in the States, mothers take charge of the Puerto Rican family, and for their untiring efforts they occupy a revered place in Puerto Rican culture. "Revered" is perhaps an understatement. A discussion of the Puerto Rican mother's role produces a tone of awe. Questioning a group of Puerto Rican students at Central Connecticut State University,* I asked, "What is it that puts the mother on such a high pedestal?" The kids came back with stock answers—her ability to work a job and still manage a family, her consideration for the children, her special efforts to show her love—but instead of the laughter or banter that accompanied so many of their other responses, when they talked about motherhood, the tone became serious. You didn't horse around when you used the word *madre*—"Call us anything, but never say anything about our mothers," one woman told me—and along with an obvious show of love came a healthy dose of respect. When I asked one young man, "Do you listen to your mother?" he looked at me in disbelief. "Are you kidding? My mother's the law, man."[1]

*My aim is to explain how and why Victor became a revolutionary. Whenever family matters seem relevant, I discuss them. Otherwise I have tried to respect the requests for privacy of his mother, his siblings, and other family members.

Given this cultural background, Victor would revere his mother no matter what. But Mrs. Gerena had personal qualities that actually merited all the love and respect of any child. She is almost universally portrayed as a remarkable woman. If this account seems too laudatory, I can only stress that it is the result of many long and positive interviews.

Driven from the island by poverty, fifteen-year-old Gloria Ortiz got off a plane at New York's Idlewild Airport, and despite a severe case of asthma, toiled in a factory by day and went to school by night. Four years later she had a high school diploma, and still full of energy and ambition, she hoped to go on with her education. Marriage and children intervened, but as life in the Bronx and her marriage simultaneously soured, Mrs. Gerena picked up stakes, and with five young children in hand (Victor was twelve when the move occurred), moved to Hartford in 1970 while Victor, Sr., stayed in New York. Perhaps she'd find there the opportunities New York no longer offered. At the very least the kids might have a better chance to succeed away from a neighborhood that looked like it had been bombed.

In moving north, the Gerenas followed a path already taken by other islanders. With nearly one million Puerto Ricans in residence, New York always had more people than work; and with low-level jobs still moving out as other unskilled Hispanics moved in (for example, from the Dominican Republic), chances for an open-ended future became slimmer and slimmer. Therefore, in a second forced migration, thousands of Puerto Ricans

*Victor took courses at Central, and his brothers and sister attend the school.

moved to Connecticut. Following a line from Stamford to Bridgeport to New Britain and Hartford, they found the cities vacated by suburbanites, and moving in or near the local black population, Puerto Ricans tried to survive in housing developments like Hartford's Charter Oak Terrace.[2] Except for a short stay in the National Guard, Victor lived in or near Charter Oak for the next twelve years. And by all accounts he hated it.

In Hartford and West Hartford, the mere mention of Charter Oak Terrace brings fear and trepidation into even a policeman's voice. That's where "they" live, and you know what "they're" like. As I drove off to do some interviews, one cop told me, "Never go at night, never leave any valuables in your car, and at all costs, lock the vehicle when you leave it. Then, with luck, it'll still be there when you return."

To get to Charter Oak, you literally cross the railroad tracks in front of the Diamond Lumber Company. Your car then bumps along the road that leads to Wells Fargo, and, right across the street is the development that housed Victor and his family. The two-story apartment buildings might have been attractive when new, but today they are worn out, and as in Puerto Rico, wrought iron bars cover the lower-level windows. The grass isn't green because, in general, there isn't any grass. Like a sandlot used for ballgames, the front of the Terrace is brown, uninviting, and full of the drug pushers, pimps, and prostitutes who service, not only this neighborhood, but plush West Hartford as well.

Charter Oak is a twentieth-century poorhouse, and Victor hated it not only because poverty's no fun but because he disliked the stigma attached to being poor in the United States. As a man, he would precisely articulate his feelings, but as a youngster he only knew that when people said, "That's where *they* live," they and he were the same person. Friend after friend says Victor hated the everyday slaps in the face meted out to the poor, and if, as an adolescent, his responses were sometimes contradictory —one day he wanted to be rich, the next day he was angry—the stigma of poverty stuck to Victor as tightly as the love he received at home.[3]

Once they settled in, Mrs. Gerena got a job. She began the college courses that would many years later earn her two degrees (a B.A. and a masters in social work), and all the while she managed to keep a close watch on her children. If they participated in a school sport, she attended the games. If they were

involved in a play, she took a seat in the hall. "She went to bat for those kids no matter what," said teacher Tom Lyons, "and I don't think she was a pusher." She just wanted to show them they always had a cheering section at home. The latter part of Lyons's comment is important, because when Victor finally announced he was a Machetero, people immediately blamed his mother. "She brainwashed the kid," said one cop, "that's why he did it." That's a simplistic explanation that ignores the basic reasons for Victor's actions. First, it is true that Mrs. Gerena is an ardent independentista who, like any parent, imparted her beliefs and values to her children. They grew up with a healthy respect for their ethnic identities, and they certainly learned about the history of Puerto Rican–American relations. But there is no evidence (or at least none that I have uncovered) that Mrs. Gerena drilled hatred or revolution into her children's minds. She has her beliefs, and she is quite passionate about them, but as a mother she gave Victor room to grow.

What she did was provide an environment in which Victor consistently had self-respect and a sense of *dignidad.* The exact English translation of this word is "dignity," but that one-word translation misses one of the key elements of Puerto Rican culture: You must have the respect of others at all times, and in everyday intercourse, you must give what you want back. Ignore a mistake made by a colleague. Praise a modest accomplishment. And don't impartially judge an argument or boast, because as Anthony Lauria, Jr., put it, "for Puerto Ricans one's very social existence is predicated upon the bonds of respect." In a conversation at school, at a bar, at work, or on the street, "one is always careful not to step on the other's dignidad. Men might kill for many reasons in Puerto Rico (and in the States) but their reasons are usually phrased in the idiom of dignidad." It's as if one Puerto Rican says to another: Don't mess with my self-respect because dignidad is the basis around which my life revolves.[4]

Analyzing this concept, historians point to five hundred years of colonialism. A people constantly under somebody else's heel naturally developed a sensitivity to even the slightest insult. To protect themselves, Puerto Ricans developed a code that always keeps threats to another's self-esteem under the table. Nobody finds out what you're really thinking, and even more important, nobody gets a chance to lose their sense of self-respect.

In a culture that deemed dignity essential, Victor got more

than his fair share. The poverty stigma burned, but he had love at home, and since he is the eldest, he also had a good degree of responsibility. With Mrs. Gerena at work, Victor assumed many parental roles, and since he did a good job, Victor got the positive feedback that goes with being "man of the house." He helped run the home, and, adding one accomplishment to another, he did well in school. Victor excelled in sports, and the kid with "the dancing green eyes" also found himself a magnet for the opposite sex.

Victor did and did not have it made. The family still lacked money, he still felt the sting of living in Charter Oak, and all the while, he listened to an earful of "negative input" about Puerto Ricans and blacks. But if he confined his comparisons to other Puerto Ricans, and to the other black and white kids at Bulkeley High, Victor came out at or near the top. He was a winner, whose pleasing personality—everybody at least liked Victor—moved many people to love and respect him.

Jane Martin taught Victor in freshman Spanish—where he sat next to Pamela Anderson, later Pamela Gerena—and, with tears in her eyes, she remembered a kid who was "super." Victor had an ability to conceptualize, he saw "deeper into subjects than other students," and he was really concerned about the other kids.* Jane Martin said she told his mother "I'd adopt him as a second son" and told Victor that "if I ever had a son, I'd want one like him."

That's pretty heady stuff. But Victor heard it often because he had charm linked to a sense of humor, and because the teachers at Bulkeley High are a rare breed. For example, when you enter the Lyons house (Tom and wife both teach at Bulkeley), you walk into a living room full of pictures. "There are more in the basement," but upstairs was enough for me because the student photos filled tables and bookcases. These are the kids the Lyons' have helped, and with a great deal of justifiable pride, they put them front and center. They know each student by name, they remember his or her character, and, as each year rolls around, they add more memories of a lifetime devoted to a love: teaching in an inner-city school.

In his teachers, Victor met dedicated people who told him he could and should make it. He had what it took to get ahead, and

*Victor later joined Bulkeley's Peer Counseling Club.

especially in sports, he showed a degree of perseverance that many Americans find admirable. About to wrestle in the state championships, Victor broke his hand, but despite the pain and the limited chance of success, he wrestled till the other guy put him down. As a member of the football team, the small but muscular kid (Victor stands about 5'6" tall) played the line. He took on all comers until one day he went up against a guy who measured a hulking 6'3". Victor correctly complained, "Coach, there's a man playing in there against me" but went back out to get his lumps. The coach proudly recalls that "Victor and another lineman got the guy in the next series of plays."

Although Victor got deserved praise for his prowess and his gutsiness, he quit football in his senior year and some teachers thought this seemingly inconsequential act showed his Achilles' heel. The team was losing, and Victor didn't get the playing time he thought he deserved, so rather than be second string on a poor team, he quit. That bothered a few people—"It seemed like as long as he wasn't going to be on a winner, why stick with it?"—but Victor's real sensitivity to slights rarely had a chance to make an appearance at Bulkeley.

In his senior year he won an academic scholarship, and as an added perk, he was selected to serve as an intern at the state capitol. On the way up the ladder of success, Victor Gerena would work for six months in a program specially designed for promising students. In hindsight, Victor's work at the capitol was a watershed experience. It underlined the conflicting strains in his life (Do I want into such an oppressive, prejudiced system?) as it moved him to select a college that would almost indifferently take away the dignity offered, first by his mother, and second by the dedicated staff at Bulkeley.

As usual Victor got on well with everybody. He worked so hard and so well that, as he helped administrators add amendments to bills, he devised a new and ingenious cataloging system. "We still use Victor's method," said Marion Delaney, as she recalled a person "who showed a remarkable sense of responsibility for a young man. He took a great interest in the operation of the House of Representatives, and he was always willing to put in the long hours called for even though there was no additional compensation."

As Delaney came to love Victor, she tried to help him polish his act. When he showed his roots, she told him to "knock off the

street talk" because "if you don't speak properly you're not going to get anywhere." Admittedly Delaney was "brutal" with Victor, but this good-hearted, totally unprejudiced woman saw a kid with brains. When Victor talked about his choice of college, she mentioned her alma mater, a small formerly all-woman school called Annhurst, run by Catholic nuns. It was expensive, and the scholarship Victor received paid only a thousand dollars a year, but Delaney not only found Victor the additional funds, she and her husband took Victor and Mrs. Gerena on a tour of the school. They liked what they saw and the college, then in serious financial trouble because of declining enrollment, quickly said yes to a kid who would soon bunk with a bunch of spoiled, oil-rich Venezuelans.

Although Victor had just made a big mistake, he had no way of knowing it in the spring of 1976. As he prepared himself for college, he developed friendships with people who wanted to prepare him for the real world. If only because of his mother, Victor had a strong social conscience that these nationalists brought to the surface when they exposed him to a variety of "radical" literature. One fellow gave me the copy of the Young Lords' party volume first read by Victor when he worked at the capitol.[5] "He had it for a long time," and it told him that the "chains that have been taken off slaves' bodies are put back on their minds." Puerto Ricans came to the mainland to get a good job, "but it didn't take long to find out that the American Dream that was publicized so nicely on the island turned out to be the ameriKKKan nightmare."

Victor had met his roots, and they spelled revolution, which he did and did not support. At this stage of his life Victor was being pulled in two quite different directions. Some people wanted to polish a diamond in the rough; they pushed Victor to leave the streets behind him. Others wanted Victor to march with a machete; The Young Lords' party volume told him that "the reason you study history is cause you're gonna make history. The reason you study the past is cause you're concerned about making a new life, not making the same mistakes that our people did before us."

Victor wanted that new life, and he certainly had no desire to make mistakes, but when it came time to enter Annhurst, he resolved the tug of war by showing up for college. Friends say he wasn't thrilled ("His attitude was let's check out the water without jumping in") but he did go. And it was a colossal mistake.

Located in Brooklyn, Connecticut, Annhurst's rural location reinforced Victor's sense of social isolation. He was the only Puerto Rican in the school, the women were straightlaced middle- and upper-class Catholics, and as an unintentional addition of insult to injury, the poor kid from the streets got locked (literally—the school had rigorously enforced curfews) in a dorm with a bunch of rich Venezuelans. As Sister Francis put it, "He didn't mix well with those students because their idea of a good time was to spend a thousand dollars on the weekend."

The dorm was bad, but the classrooms were worse because a sensitive kid with no experience of personal failure suddenly found himself exposed to a barrage of criticism and ridicule. At Bulkeley, street-smart teachers had told Victor he was a fine, well-prepared student. At Annhurst, professors in spanking-clean black robes told him he had no business being in college. His knowledge of grammar was weak, and he couldn't even succeed in Spanish because the nuns, in search of a Castilian brand spoken by the "best" people, didn't recognize that Victor spoke a Spanish developed at the "intersection of two nationalities."[6]

The better people derisively called it Spanglish, but nationalists who liked the Young Lords' manual argued that the interpenetrating usage of the two languages showed a creativity that deserved praise. The nuns told Victor he lacked written and oral comprehension in any language—"The poor guy must have felt very inadequate," said Sister Francis—but, then again, the nuns had never read the Young Lords' manual, which contained this kind of poetry:

> Aqui wigs are not necessary
> Aqui we admire desire
> And never get tired of each other
> Aqui que pasa Power is what's happening
> Aqui to be called negrito [black] y negrita
> Means to be called LOVE.

With the best of intentions, the nuns systematically took away what Victor needed most: his sense of self-worth, his dignidad. He stopped going to class on a regular basis—why come to hear professors publicly underline his label of inadequacy?—and with little chance of talking to people who could relate to his prob-

lems, Victor distanced himself from almost everyone at Annhurst. Sister Helen Bonin said, "He had a lot of anger in him"; Sister Muriel Lusignan recalled a kid who "was more or less a loner"; and Donald Caron, an Annhurst dorm director, said Victor not only felt like an "outsider," he "walked around with a big chip on his shoulder."

Victor had never experienced real failure before, and he never wanted to meet it again. As one of his best friends notes, "Victor always feared failure." It wasn't supposed to happen to him, and now that it had, Victor needed to explain why. What the hell was going on?

In trying to get some answers, Victor found some trouble. He wanted to talk to his family and used the school's office phone without permission and without paying. A minor infraction at most schools, it was a big issue to the nuns, and to Victor's classroom woes it added charges of "social misconduct."

With the phone off limits, Victor needed a sounding board. He vented his anger in conversations with dorm director Caron. "Night after night, we'd sit up till two, three in the morning, discussing Victor's feelings," said Caron, who tried to provide a buffer between the troubled young man and the proper school. "He felt he didn't belong." He could not associate with the Venezuelans who flaunted their cash, and—"this came up very often"—he "accused people of holding being Puerto Rican against him." Caron initially said this wasn't so, but in one especially ugly incident, somebody smeared "dog shit" on Victor's dorm door. After that, it was hard for Caron to deny the legitimacy of Victor's claims.

It was also hard to deny the young man's brains, style, and anger. He bitterly resented the teachers at Bulkeley who, with their praise, had readied him for humiliation. And he was "almost eloquent" in his condemnation of capitalism and, more specifically, American treatment of Puerto Rico. At eighteen, Victor knew the history and like so many other mainland-born revolutionaries, he responded to it with feelings of outrage.

On the island, being poor and Puerto Rican is commonplace. On the mainland, it makes you an outsider who, standing on the society's periphery, gets a better look into the heart of the problem. Some Puerto Ricans, when they take that look, embrace resignation and self-hate. Others turn to drugs. Others immediately embrace the revolution—many imprisoned members of the

FALN were born in the United States. And still others vacillate between legitimate anger and illegitimate self-depreciation.

Annhurst scarred Victor. For a while "he was really plugging away at it," said Caron, but "he soon gave up." And to a Hartford friend who visited him at the school Victor commented, "I can't take this bullshit." He still wanted to get ahead, but nobody at Bulkeley had told him that, by the time he even got to the starting line, the other kids would be laps and laps ahead.

In another school, with a network of support, Victor might have tried to catch up. With support, it's easier to know you're right. Without it, you can know you're correct, but like Victor at Annhurst, you still believe what they say about you. And—it's always a temptation—you often add self-pity to self-doubt. You let the system beat you because you take out your anger on yourself.

That's what one side of Victor did. He gave up on college, and to some extent he gave up on himself. Under circumstances that included a school visit by Mrs. and Mr. Gerena, Victor left Annhurst on March 10, 1977—his school records say he was dismissed because of "social misconduct"—no longer owning the sense of self-confidence that had given his life a direction. He returned to Hartford politically aware but personally battered. As if it were a river he could but would not cross, Annhurst had added to personal sensitivity and the cultural emphasis on dignity a decided fear of failure, especially scholastic failure. It temporarily left Victor without a direction, a goal, or confidence. As he tried to sort things out, Victor moved from one dead-end job to another and from one woman to another.

Victor soon moved in with Maggie Ruiz. Six years his senior, and quite pretty, the two had met while she was a student at Bulkeley. Many of Victor's unauthorized phone calls had been to Maggie, who offered him not only love and respect but a hospice as well.

Victor worked at a variety of odd jobs. He did some roofing, he was a "recreation assistant" (at $3.81 an hour) for the Parks Department, and, to keep his hand in politics, he also worked (again for $3.81 an hour) as a social service advisor at Hartford's Community Resources for Justice. With a tinge of nostalgia, associates recall that if a kid got into trouble, and especially if it looked like a raw deal, Victor would go to bat for the underdog. He lobbied hard to get offenders into the rehabilitation programs

that erased any criminal record as they hopefully put the kids on a straight and narrow path.

During the summer and fall of 1977, Victor was acquainted with a variety of local independentistas. His politics merged with theirs, and according to José (a pseudonym), Victor actively sought membership in independence groups. He wanted to join the movement, but he was told to wait a while because he still lacked a sufficient grounding in revolutionary theory and practice. Independentistas needed a bit of social seasoning. If Victor continued to show interest and discipline, perhaps down the road a bit his application for membership would be reconsidered. At that time, a variety of local activists simply kept a close watch on this bright, likable young man. Perhaps when he matured a bit, Victor Gerena would be permitted to join a group he sought out.

Meanwhile Maggie was pregnant, as Victor kept up a relationship with his high school girlfriend Pamela Anderson. She had joined the service, and Victor, eager to put distance between himself and Maggie, did the same thing. He signed up for the National Guard, which surprised Pamela—"I have no idea why he joined because while in the service he thought it was a joke; he always laughed about the rules and procedures"—but it got Victor out of Connecticut and, once he managed an assignment near the base where Pamela was stationed in Georgia, the two were married, on May 1, 1978. To get some cash Victor worked at a gas station on the interstate highway (for $2.31 an hour). Still harboring feelings for Maggie and guilt about her situation, he visited her in Connecticut two weeks after the birth of their daughter. By November Victor's confusion—friends tell me he knew neither who he wanted nor what he wanted to do—soured his relationship with Pamela, who was also pregnant. In November 1978, he returned to Hartford to once again live with Maggie.

This was the low point of Victor's still very young life. He took a "stuffer's" job in the mail room of the *Hartford Courant* (at $3 an hour), but with two families to support and no better employment prospects in sight, personal, not political, issues dominated his everyday existence. What was he going to do? He still wanted to be successful, and he always told Maggie he wanted "to do it on his own," but with his college career foreclosed by an invalid fear of failure, he took one viable alternative. In June 1979, Victor enrolled at the A.I. Prince Technical School. For a kid most likely to succeed, this was quite a comedown, but as a certified machine

operator, he could at least earn a decent living. Assuming, of course, that Victor could stand working in a factory.

Victor hated Pratt and Whitney Aircraft. He got the job in October 1979, and if the money was good ($260 a week), the job drove him crazy. Cooped up in a factory, turning out second-shift engine parts—Victor was a Vertical Turret Lathe Operator—he tired of the tedium. His official records say "he was dismissed because of poor attendance on September 5, 1980," but in reality he simply called Maggie from work and said, "Get me out of here."

Now what? Victor still cared about Puerto Rico (Maggie told police that "he often talked about the island and how beautiful it was," and Priscilla [a pseudonym], an acquaintance of his, in 1980 and 1981, said "He wanted Puerto Rico free, and he was heavily into the Puerto Rican movement"), but personal problems still dominated his life. Pamela divorced him in May 1980, he and Maggie had ended their relationship soon after he had left the factory. Now, with no job and two women understandably demanding child support, Victor was pushed against the wall. Paul Carney, his roommate during this period, told police "Victor would often cry for extended periods of time regarding being hassled by Maggie and Pamela." They wanted money, he didn't have any, and he didn't know what to do.

For a short while he drove a truck for Connecticut Furriers, but he was able to quit that job when, thanks to the efforts of an old friend, Victor landed a solid, if very low-paying (about $160 a week) position at Hartford's Special Education Learning Center. Run by the socially concerned, pleasingly offbeat Ray Petty, the center specialized in trouble. It took kids with serious adjustment problems and tried to channel them back into the mainstream. No kid was too tough for Petty's people to handle, and to listen to Ray tell it, the toughest ones went to his newest Puerto Rican recruit, one Victor Gerena.

The center touched Victor's best instincts and skills. He genuinely wanted to help people, and full of street smarts, he had a knack no formal education could provide. In one case, "the young man was literally beating the teacher," who was "deathly afraid of the kid." Petty called in Victor, who stayed in the teacher's classroom for three straight weeks and restored order.

From January 1981, Victor stayed at the center until he joined Wells Fargo. His experience at the center was the bridge that

finally led him to seek a goal that had long been in his mind: to work for a free Puerto Rico.

Day after day, Victor impressed the school's staff. His title was "paraprofessional," but Paul Perzanowski, formally his boss, describes a man with first-class teaching skills. He cared about the kids, he understood their problems, and for the first time in years, Victor was doing something he actually enjoyed. "He really felt good about the teaching," his superiors really felt good about him, and all the while, Victor was helping Puerto Ricans who, like him, had been battered by the system. What more could anybody want?

The obvious answer is a degree and a decent salary, neither of which could come Victor's way unless he returned to college. Petty and Perzanowski pressured him to get his degree ("God knows you got the brains, man") but they had a hell of a hard time breaking down the wall of resistance thrown up against Annhurst. Perzanowski, for example, remembers a guy with a "burning desire" to make a mark on life ("It's as if Victor said we're here and we're going to make somebody remember us"), but just as vividly, he affectionately recalls a colleague whose worst fear was the fear of failure.

Throughout 1981, the center staff "worked" on Victor. With praise he deserved, they hoped to establish the sense of confidence that would enable him to reenter college. Added to Victor's Annhurst experience were four years of personal turmoil. He understood he bore responsibility for his chaotic life (to a close friend Victor confided that "he'd let others, and especially his mother, down") but despite this honest admission, he had a hard time facing professors who spoke and demanded standard English.

In the end Perzanowski thought he'd won. Victor enrolled at Central Connecticut State University in the spring of 1982, and commuting by bus between Hartford and New Britain, he made another attempt at higher education. But as if in a terrible echo from the past, teachers at Central pressed him for the same grammatical skills the nuns had. Six years after Annhurst, school meant catching up to even reach the starting line. After the first few weeks of night school, Victor stopped going to classes, and he also stopped going to work. With no explanation to Petty or Perzanowski, Victor quit his job at the center, and two months later, he signed on with Wells Fargo Guard Services as a

"jumper," a guy who fills in for regular guards who are sick or don't show up.

Was Victor a Machetero when he took the Wells Fargo job? And, if he was, who recruited him?

People have been asking these questions since Victor first announced his revolutionary affiliation, expecting, I sometimes think, to ultimately discover the local recruiting office of Los Macheteros. As one very sharp reporter told me, "I haven't quite wrapped up exactly how Victor was recruited."

There wasn't anything exact about it. Victor had known every radical independentista in Hartford for years. They knew his politics, and they knew his deep-seated, long-standing desire to help the movement.

Nobody duped Victor or filled him full of romantic stories about revolutionary exploits. On the contrary, his associates indicate that he knew exactly what he was getting into when, as a result of conversations with friends, he made it known he was available for mobilization. His nationalist comrades, sensing a now solid prospect, saw a good fit between their needs and Victor's desires.

Based on a well-grounded understanding of the issues, Victor had been politically radical for many years. At age twenty-three, he felt, with considerable justification, that he had let people down. He wanted his life to mean something. He had no money, his ex-wife and ex-lover were threatening to take him to court for lack of sufficient child support, and in a final effort to get into the system, he again encountered harsh assaults on his dignidad.

Los Macheteros offered Victor what he genuinely needed: a meaningful way to make up for the past. By joining their organization, he got service in a just cause, a possible place in Puerto Rican history, and escape from a dead-end life of tedium and turmoil.

Of course Victor was a Machetero when he joined Wells Fargo. But as an outsider on the American mainland he was a Machetero in spirit long before he took the guard job. All Wells Fargo did was confirm in action what he already believed in theory. For example, Victor had no need for a rigorous training program in history and politics. Since it had been agreed by Hartford Macheteros that he would serve the independentistas' cause, when, from Puerto Rico, Juan Enrique Segarra (head of

the Tainos cell) called Victor at home in March 1982, it was only to confirm a commitment Victor had already made. He would check out Wells Fargo for the movement, and when things looked right, then and only then would precise plans for a robbery be made.

Victor started as a jumper. For Wells Fargo Guard Services, he protected a soft drink bottling plant and a fur store. Since neither of these assignments offered good expropriation prospects, on May 6, 1982, Victor applied for a job with Armored Services. In need of anybody to take their low-paid positions, Wells Fargo Armored Services quickly hired Victor to work in the West Hartford branch. Now he was in with the loot and in a company so disorganized that, as he worked in the armored division, he received this threat from the guard division: If he didn't immediately return the uniform he'd been issued, Mr. Gerena should understand that anyone "who withholds such property from an owner is guilty of LARCENY IN THE THIRD DEGREE, a Class B misdemeanor."

Victor wasn't worried. The movement provided the sense of purpose he needed (he told one comrade, "I really feel good about this. I'm really into this") and in love with his live-in companion Liza Soto, Victor enjoyed a relatively happy life. When Soto, the night of the robbery, told the West Hartford police that she and Victor lived a quiet, almost solitary existence, she was telling the truth. Victor had made his commitment, he kept in shape with activities like jogging, and while waiting for the right time to hit Wells Fargo, the last thing he needed was to call attention to himself. He saw local independentistas when necessary, but beyond these infrequent and clandestine gatherings, Victor lived a life as quiet as any solid pillar of the community.

In what one insider describes as a "final certification procedure," Victor did travel to Puerto Rico in June 1983, accompanied by Eliseo Alejandro Ortiz. This independentista had lived in Hartford, knew Victor, and accompanied him on a trip that included, besides final plans for the robbery, a sentimental journey to Lares, sight of the 1868 independence insurrection.

Although Los Macheteros wanted to make sure Victor understood the real meaning of revolution, their last-minute discussions of party theory were totally unnecessary. An associate who spoke with Victor shortly before the robbery says that "while

quite unhappy about 'forever' leaving family and friends, he never doubted his revolutionary choice."

And why would he? Independence was a just cause, it helped him resolve a six-year battle with failure, and if the expropriation succeeded, he would have accomplished something significant to help preserve the political and economic chaos that was contemporary Puerto Rico.

Victor cared. And if personal problems partially explain his actions, he only resolved those problems with Los Macheteros because he had, for at least six years, wanted to free his country from eighty-five years of American colonialism.

Did Victor succeed? In terms of cash, of course. By anybody's standards, $7 million is a good revolutionary stake. The robbery certainly served its fund-raising purpose.

But what about independence? Did Victor move his people closer to freedom? That's harder to judge because of the irony that surrounds the robbery's aftermath. Victor, the one sure bet to get caught, is still free, and in all likelihood, he will remain silent because of the possibly adverse effect any of his statements could have on his eighteen alleged assistants.

With Victor still a prisoner of his own success, and Los Macheteros restraining themselves because of the possibly negative effect their actions could have on the nineteen defendants,* it appears that the robbery hurt rather than helped the independence movement. Los Macheteros have the means but no way to achieve their ends, without hurting the defendants.

Maybe, but maybe not, because the arrest and subsequent court treatment of the defendants have raised, even more clearly than the robbery, the political issues that nourish and sustain the Puerto Rican independence movement. If the trial produces a national debate about the status of Puerto Rico, it's entirely possible that prosecutors will do more for Los Macheteros than Victor Manuel Gerena Ortiz did.

*To date the only subsequent Machetero action occurred on October 28, 1986, when, along with FARP and the Organization of Volunteers, Los Macheteros planted two bombs that damaged a U.S. Army-Navy recruiting station and a National Guard facility, both on Puerto Rico. The bombings were to protest the possible use of Puerto Rico as a training area for Nicaraguan Contras and to protest plans to begin commercial logging at El Yunque, the national rain forest of Puerto Rico.

NOTES

1. Joseph Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971). Also Lloyd Rogler and Rosemary Santana Cooney, *Puerto Rican Families in New York City: Intergenerational Processes* (Maplewood, N.J.: Waterfront Press, 1985); Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963).
2. For example, Rita Maldonado, "Why Puerto Ricans Migrated to the United States in 1947–1973," *Monthly Labor Review* (September, 1976): 7–18.
3. Chaim Waxman, *The Stigma of Poverty* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979), especially 69–100. Also Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty* (New York: Random House, 1983).
4. See Anthony Lauria, "Respeto, Relajo, and Interpersonal Relations in Puerto Rico," *Anthropological Quarterly* 37/2 (1964). See also Gordon Lewis, *Puerto Rico: Freedom and Power in the Caribbean* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 420–21.
5. The Young Lords' Party and Michael Abramson, *Palante, Young Lords' Party* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971).
6. Juan Flores, John Athenasi, and Pedro Pedrozza, Jr., "La Carreta Made A U-Turn: Puerto Rican Language and Culture In the United States," *Daedalus* 110/2 (1979): 193–217.

11

Prisoners of War

THE INDICTMENTS

For a variety of legal reasons, there were two sets of Wells Fargo indictments, the first handed down on August 30, 1985, the second on March 21, 1986. The list below is based on the second set of charges, but whether in August or March, prosecutors leveled their key allegations against the men (Victor Gerena, Filiberto Ojeda Rios, and Juan Enrique Segarra) we have already analyzed in some detail. As the government indictments see it, the robbery essentially involved only a handful of people. In the interests of completeness, the list below contains the criminal charges against each of the defendants, as well as a few significant details about their everyday lives and, where known, their previous political activity.

Eight of the criminal counts show great creativity on the government's part. Prosecutors broke the $7 million down into four parts ($6.5 million from the federally insured Bank of Boston, $300,000 from the federally insured Connecticut National Bank, $17,000 from the federally insured New England Savings Bank, and $95,000 from the federally insured Connecticut Bank and Trust Company) and then charged some defendants with four counts of "Robbery of Federally Insured Bank Funds," and because of Victor's handling of guards McKeon and Girard, four counts of "Aggravated Robbery of Federally Insured Bank Funds."

In terms of the indictments, Victor committed four separate robberies, with four separate aggravated assaults. Attorneys tell me that charges are often multiplied in this manner to substantially increase the amount of time the accused may ultimately spend behind bars.

Five other criminal counts revolve around moving the money. Immediately taking the cash to Boston produced one count of "Interstate Transportation of Stolen Money"; and later

moving $12,000 from Puerto Rico to underwrite the Hartford Three Kings giveaway produced another charge of "Interstate Transportation of Stolen Money." Carrying the loot from Boston to Mexico to Cuba produced two counts of "Foreign Transportation of Stolen Money."

Since part of the $7 million was money that was being transferred by Wells Fargo from Boston to Springfield to Hartford to Bridgeport, another criminal count is "Theft from an Interstate Shipment." One count involves "Interference with Commerce by Robbery" and the last two, and by far most detailed, counts center on charges of a widespread conspiracy. Targeting the planning for the robbery, the transfer of the money, and the Three Kings Giveaway—the indictments include these criminal charges: "Conspiracy to Interfere with Commerce by Robbery" and "Conspiracy to Rob Federally Insured Funds, to Commit a Theft from Interstate Shipment, and to Transport Stolen Money In Interstate and Foreign Commerce." Since the government focused its charges on seven people, I have separated the prisoners into major and minor defendants.

THE MAJOR DEFENDANTS

Victor Gerena Ortiz. Victor is charged in fourteen counts of the government's seventeen-count indictment. He is not charged in two of the counts of "Foreign Transportation of Stolen Money," and he is not charged in one of the counts of "Interstate Transportation of Stolen Money," that is, the money that paid for the Hartford toy giveaway.

Filiberto Ojeda Rios. Although he has been actively involved in proindependence activities since his youth, Ojeda Rios made his living as a musician. To quote from an FBI document, he "is an excellent trumpet player who performed with a number of prominent bands." Married, he has four children. Ojeda Rios is charged in all seventeen counts of the indictment.

Juan Enrique Segarra Palmer. Thirty-six years old and a man of considerable charm and intelligence, Segarra says that one reason he became an independentista was the prejudice he experienced while attending Harvard University. He is married to Luz Berrios Berrios, they have two children, and he earned a living by selling Hispanic arts and crafts and working for cable TV stations. Segarra says he planned a documentary about Victor

and the Wells Fargo robbery. Only he and Ojeda Rios are charged in all seventeen counts of the government's indictment.

Hilton Fernandez Diamante. Forty-two years old, Fernandez has a degree in political science and economics from the University of Puerto Rico, and is an active member of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. As a young man, he refused to register for the draft, believing that the United States has no legitimate authority over the life of any Puerto Rican. Fernandez is married and has two children. At his bond hearings, witnesses described him as a "good husband and dedicated father." He is charged in fifteen of the seventeen counts: As an alleged member of the Macheteros policymaking bodies he is said to have assisted in planning, robbing, and eventually helping to transport the stolen funds.

Jorge Farinacci Garcia. Thirty-seven years old, Farinacci is arguably one of the island's best-known labor attorneys. He has been active in the independence movement since he was a young man, and while attending college, he worked against the draft and against the presence of the ROTC on Puerto Rican campuses. He is on the Editorial Board of *Pensamiento Critico* (Critical Thought), an independent journal of economic and political analysis. He is married to Maria Dolores Fernos Tati, whose father was Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner to Washington in 1948 and, along with Muñoz Marin, instrumental in making the island a Commonwealth.

Although he is charged in fifteen of the seventeen indictments, the case against Farinacci is weak. Attorneys looking at his case from very different political perspectives believe he will be easily acquitted.

Avelino and **Norberto Gonzalez Claudio.** These two men are brothers. A third brother, Orlando, is an alleged founder of Los Macheteros, and neither Avelino nor Norberto has been arrested. Since August 30, 1985, both have lived underground. Each is charged in fifteen counts of the indictment: The government alleges that each helped plan, carry out, and transport the stolen Wells Fargo funds.

THE BACKGROUND FIGURES

Orlando Gonzalez Claudio. Thirty-nine years old, he is a well-respected farmer and carpenter. Long an open independentista,

he is allegedly a founder of Los Macheteros, is a member of the Episcopal Church of Dorado, and in his spare time manages a women's baseball team. He faces charges on six criminal counts. Three focus on foreign transport of stolen money, one cites him for interference with commerce by robbery, and the other two allege a basically minor role in the conspiracy to rob Wells Fargo, transport the money, and assure its safety.

Luz Berrios Berrios. Thirty-seven years old, she obtained a degree in occupational therapy from the University of Puerto Rico and then worked for ten years at a hospital owned by the Puerto Rican Social Security Fund. She also worked as a free-lance therapist.

Ms. Berrios, who became an independentista during her college years, is charged with two counts of conspiracy, one count of interfering with commerce by robbery, and, for her supposed involvement in the Hartford Three Kings giveaway, one count of Interstate Transportation of Stolen Money.

Elias Castro Ramos. He has a masters degree in the natural sciences and for the last seven years has earned his living as a teacher. He has been quite active in the island's Federation of Teachers. Of the four criminal counts with which he is charged, one involves helping to take the money to Mexico, the second involves interference with commerce, and like so many of the others, he is charged with two counts of conspiracy. In his case, the alleged conspiracy centered on moving the money.

Issac Comacho Negron. He too studied at the center of the island's independence movement, the University of Puerto Rico, but after three years, he dropped out to start his own locksmith business. He is married and the father of three children. Like Elias Castro Ramos, he is charged with one count of helping to take the money abroad, one count of interfering with commerce, and two counts of conspiring with the major defendants to help move the Wells Fargo funds.

Angel Diaz Ruiz. His long-standing independence beliefs led him to refuse to serve in the American military, and according to the Puerto Rican Committee Against Repression, "for that reason he has been unable to obtain a good job." He earned what he could by fumigating homes, cleaning patios, and working as a photographer. Married to Ivonne Melendez Carrion, he has three sons. He is charged with one count of Interference with Commerce by Robbery and two counts of conspiracy, but the

government's indictment makes only the broadest of charges against Mr. Diaz.

Ivonne Melendez Carrion. She has a B.A. in sociology from the University of Puerto Rico, with a concentration in Social Work. She has long been a proud and open advocate of Puerto Rican independence. She is charged in four criminal counts, one alleging assistance in transferring the money to Mexico, another charging interference with commerce, and two counts of conspiracy as a background member of the plot to move Wells Fargo funds.

Norman Ramirez Talavera. Born in New York City, he graduated from the School of Practical Arts of the Cultural Institute of Puerto Rico and has long worked as a graphic artist with Caribe Graphics, the printing business that the FBI alleges was a Macheteros front. He is a member of the Masons—*El Gran Oriente Interamericano Americano de Puerto Rico*. The charges against him are one count of interstate transportation of stolen money (the Hartford Three Kings giveaway) and two sketchy counts of conspiracy to use and move the Wells Fargo funds.

Carlos Ayes Suarez. Twenty-seven years old, he has a degree in anthropology from the University of Puerto Rico and is presently working toward a masters degree in Puerto Rican Themes at the Center for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Like Norman Ramirez, he is a member of the Masons. As a boy, he was an activist in the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. He is charged with one count of interstate transportation of stolen money (his alleged participation in the Hartford Three Kings giveaway) and two counts of background activity in the conspiracy to move and use the Wells Fargo funds.

Luis Colon Osorio. A graduate of the University of Puerto Rico, he has a degree in political science. He has long been an independentista and earns a living as an automobile mechanic. He is charged with one count of interfering with commerce and two counts of conspiracy, which center on his alleged participation in one of the island's Three Kings giveaways.

Roberto Maldonado Rivera. He is a well-known and well-respected Puerto Rican attorney and is married to Coqui Sandilez, one of the island's best-loved poets. Mr. Maldonado has long been an open advocate of independence.

He is charged in four counts, one alleging assistance in taking the money to Mexico, another charging interference with com-

merce, and the last two centering on his undefined role in the conspiracy to use and move the Wells Fargo funds.

Antonio Comacho Negron. He is charged in four counts. One argues that he helped move funds to Mexico, another that he interfered with commerce. As with so many of the others, there are two sketchy counts of conspiracy against Mr. Comacho.

Paul Weinberg. He is the only non–Puerto Rican charged in the indictments and the only defendant not charged with being a member of Los Macheteros. Weinberg is a graduate of Harvard with a law degree from Northeastern University. He practices law in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the government says he became involved because of his long-standing friendship—they went to Harvard together—with Juan Segarra. He is charged in four counts, one of helping to move part of the money to Mexico in a second motorhome, another charging interference with commerce, and two counts of being a background member of the conspiracy to move the Wells Fargo funds.

The indictments can be seen as a neat list of criminal code violations, but they hide as much as they reveal. A reader could easily perceive the gravity of the government's charges but, focusing on the list, might have been surprised by the heated and crucial colonial battle that began the moment the federal courts took control of the fates of Los Macheteros. Armed with 1,300 reels of authorized wiretaps, plus the safe-house haul, plus the surveillance photos, plus the motor home full of prints, prosecutors understandably felt they had an excellent case against at least the major defendants. But because defense lawyers quickly perceived their clients' evidentiary predicament, as soon as the prisoners were arraigned all sides began a legal battle that, just as much as the FBI's truckload of evidence, would decide the guilt or innocence of the shackled figures who were first marched into a federal courtroom in San Juan on the day they were arrested, Friday, August 30, 1985.

The Spanish word is *temor.* The English translation is dread. Families waiting for the arraignment hearing to begin dreaded what might have happened to their loved ones since their arrests early that morning. As one interested observer suggested, you can't face SWAT teams full of men angrily wielding pistols or machine guns and not fear the worst. For the last few minutes —it was 3:30 in the afternoon—family members had smoked

cigarettes, bitten their nails, and listened to a chorus in the courthouse hallway shout, "Cowards, cowards, they are not in chains. Viva Puerto Rico."

The defiance helped, but only the appearance of unbroken bodies would eliminate the dread that filled Magistrate Justo Arenas's courtroom. The families certainly wanted justice. But they first wanted to see that their sons and husbands were unharmed.

Once the handcuffed and chained, but no longer blindfolded defendants entered the room, families breathed easier. But not for long, because Filiberto Ojeda Rios soon protested, "Why did they abuse the prisoners?" seconded by many of those present, who, making fists with their left hands, shouted "Viva Puerto Rico Libre!"

Although the magistrate immediately threatened to remove the independentistas, their cries of protest had at least shown the families they were still full of defiance. Nothing had changed, except that a man named Arenas would now decide their families' fates in a courtroom run by an alien power.

Once defense attorneys announced which client they represented, Magistrate Arenas slowly read the indictments against the defendants. Charged with everything from taking the money to masterminding the island-based conspiracy, Ojeda Rios faced a possible 130 years in prison; Norman Ramirez (charged only with membership in Los Macheteros and with giving away toys) faced fifty years in jail; and each of the other prisoners heard the magistrate suggest prison terms ranging from twenty to forty years. Even the bravest nationalist had to fear that punishment, but it might be avoided if Los Macheteros were tried at home. Because despite what the authorities told the American public, islanders cherished their violently inclined independentistas so much that even open ties to Cuba were no basis for contempt. Less than a week before the arrests, a seventy-five-year-old comrade of Albizu Campos—Juan Juarbe Juarbe—had asked to return home from Cuba. He'd left in protest forty-nine years earlier and had worked as a foreign service officer in the Castro government. Even the conservative *San Juan Star* pleaded with federal authorities to let him come back to Puerto Rico because "one does not have to agree with the viewpoint of the nationalists to know they are a rare breed of patriots, almost an extinct species in their unrelenting clinging to principle."

If the case of Los Macheteros stayed at home, the defense knew they'd get the defendants out on bail. But the prosecutors knew the same thing. Each side fought hard because, even though it was a preliminary one, this first hearing would help seal the ultimate fate of Los Macheteros. In Puerto Rico even the wiretap evidence that supposedly proved involvement in the Wells Fargo case could easily be perceived as the talk of patriots who used extreme tactics. But on the mainland, those same tapes would offer American patriots a look inside a group of terrorists out to undermine the government of the United States.

In this case the facts did not speak for themselves. They spoke for the politics, culture, and history that, on the island, would produce the bail that would allow the defendants to more easily defend themselves, but that, on the mainland, might produce the maximum security detention that would nail them in for as long as the court case lasted.

Victory hinged on which came first, the removal or the bail hearings. If the removal hearings occurred first the defendants would be taken to the United States immediately and the bail hearings would occur in Hartford because its courts had jurisdiction over anyone arrested for the Wells Fargo robbery. But, if the bail hearings occurred first, and in Puerto Rico at that, government prosecutors would have a much more difficult time removing the defendants from their homeland.

In a highly unprecedented move, Magistrate Arenas had scheduled the removal hearings for 7 A.M., Sunday, September 1. To get the defendants abroad, federal prosecutors had to produce three things: an identification of an indictment, an identification of a person, and the person charged in the indictment. Since those elements were available to the prosecution on August 30, Special Prosecutor H. Manuel Hernandez objected when the judge suggested they begin "the detention (or bail) hearing at this time." The prosecution's position was that "in all hearings we have one hearing and it is usually had at one time." To begin the detention hearing on Friday, with the removal scheduled for Sunday, would not only interrupt the proceedings, it would make them more difficult for the judges in Connecticut. Although the government was ready to hold the pretrial detention hearing at once, didn't it make more sense to deal with the removal issue first?

As Magistrate Arenas debated what to do, the defense asked

"for at least five days" to prepare for the detention proceedings. Counsel had rushed to the courtroom when they had heard about the arrests, but there was no way they could instantly produce a serious defense. They wanted the magistrate to reschedule the removal hearing for some time "after the detention hearing has terminated."

On the issue of allowing five days to prepare no objections were raised. Both the prosecutor and the magistrate said the defense had a perfect right to the five days, but the removal hearings would still occur on Sunday. The defense, caught in a catch-22, said forget about the five days. They wanted the record to show their clients had been railroaded ("We have not been able to interview our clients individually. They were all placed in a room . . . it has been impossible for counsel to make arrangements with persons to act as witnesses . . . "), but despite the judge's "highly unreasonable" behavior, they would begin the detention hearings at once.

Now that request initially led the prosecution to lodge only a mild objection, but after a short recess, the government reversed itself.

At 4 P.M., federal attorneys had been ready to immediately begin the detention hearings. At 6 P.M., as a result of all the weapons, money, and videotapes seized at the defendants' homes, "it clearly appears that we have additional evidence to be presented to the Court that needs to be analyzed and processed." The prosecution wanted a three-day continuance, despite the fact that that meant no bail hearing until the defendants were already in Connecticut.

The defense vigorously objected. What about the warrants? They were blank. No names, no addresses, no docket number, "no signature of any judicial officer." This was totally contrary to procedure, and the judge knew it. Arenas agreed that the legal code "said in no uncertain terms that a warrant shall be signed by the magistrate," and "these are not signed by a magistrate, I realize that." Somewhat perplexed, Arenas consulted the prosecution's law library, and based on the rules it cited, he said the warrants were not "fatally defective."

That meant the prosecution got its continuance, that meant the defendants would leave on Sunday, and that led the judge to make this summary judgment of his own actions: "In a way, if these gentlemen are removed, I am putting them in a place

where they don't have ties to the community and I realize that. That may be one result of my granting the [continuance] motion of the U.S. Attorney and unfortunately that will have to be taken up in another Court. My decision stands."

A Federal Appeals Court on May 2, 1986 sustained the magistrate's position. Legally the prosecution was always in good shape. But sociologically, justice took a beating because the removal of the defendants had these four consequences:

It assured everyday confusion in court because of the need for constant translations of evidence and testimony.

It eliminated the bias that many Puerto Ricans have for their nationalists and added the even more potent prejudice that many east coast Americans have against all Puerto Ricans.

It underlined Puerto Rico's status as a separate nation. The sociological problems couldn't exist if Puerto Rico didn't possess a culture, language, and history quite different from that of the United States.

Most important, it necessitated bail and trial proceedings in communities with no adequate social and historical basis for understanding the motives of Los Macheteros. The evidence may show a group of people who planned and participated in a robbery, but public perception of motive is often so important that it can overwhelm even the most indisputable facts. When Rhode Islanders destroyed the *Gaspee* in 1771, fellow citizens knew exactly who did what, but they refused to turn over the "guilty" because they wholeheartedly approved of their neighbors' anti-British motives.

Like the destruction of the *Gaspee,* the Wells Fargo robbery can be justly understood only within the context of a struggle for national independence. Indeed, however fascinating in its own right, the robbery is still only one corner of a colonial picture that most Hartford judges and jurors have never seen. If Americans do know anything about the island, most tend to have the perceptions of colonizers. "Those ungrateful Puerto Ricans" is a comment made by many "informed" Connecticut Yankees.

The defendants were promised a fair trial. And I believe that legally they will get it. But the first step in their cultural railroading was taken as Magistrate Arenas sent them off to Hartford.

As the defendants arrested on the island were herded into two helicopters, a thousand miles away agents arrested Juan Segarra in Dallas, Texas. Charged in each and every one of the government's seventeen criminal counts, Segarra refused to cooperate when agents asked him questions. He kept repeating the same six words ("I want to see a lawyer"), but nobody listened because Segarra faced the Dallas magistrate without defense counsel being present. Weeks later another magistrate would say that had been wrong, but on August 30, nobody said a word as Segarra waived a removal hearing, which allowed the FBI to take him, not to Hartford, but to Oklahoma! There agents kept Segarra in solitary confinement for ten days—his food was pushed through a slot in the door as he kept repeating "I want to see a lawyer" —while they worked on a woman named Anne Gassin in Boston.

Gassin was believed to be Segarra's lover, and unlike virtually all the other prisoners, she was thought to be a weak link in the chain. Since she wasn't even Puerto Rican, perhaps with enough threats and persuasion—Gassin originally faced fifty years in prison as a result of her three-count indictment—she might turn state's evidence. The government would have an insurance policy against any unforeseen wiretap or surveillance problems if Gassin broke, which was far more likely if she could be kept away from Segarra. While he languished in solitary confinement, agents convinced Gassin to trade evidence about Los Macheteros for immunity from prosecution. At the trial, she is expected to be a star witness for a prosecution that, as it kept Segarra in solitary confinement, reserved equally harsh treatment for his comrades in Connecticut.

Office and apartment buildings built in the 1930s and 1940s line one side of Hartford's Main Street, while on the other sits a concrete eyesore called the Federal Building. It houses everything from the Veterans Administration to the FBI and, on an everyday basis, welcomes petitioners and plaintiffs, lawyers and bureaucrats. It's rarely a happy place, but on September 3, 1985, it was frightening.

Sharpshooters stood openly on the rooftops. You could see them from far away, but as you got closer, they were eclipsed by a battalion of black-suited, overarmed marshalls. One fellow had a shotgun over his right shoulder, a machine gun over his left, a radio attached to his breast pocket, and a string of large shotgun bullets draped across his chest. If this guy had tried to run, the sheer weight of his personal arsenal would have acted like concrete shoes. Had he tried to shoot, bystanders would most proba-

bly have been hit. No matter how precise the marksman, shotgun pellets that size had a way of "dispersing the crowd."

Attack dogs accompanied some of the other marshalls, and local cops were accompanied by plainclothes officers who wore large badges on their suits. The surrounding streets were cordoned off and the chained defendants eventually appeared in vans. As people entered the building, a squad of officers asked everyone to "take anything metal out of your pockets." If you passed the metal detector's inspection, your belongings were returned before you went inside.

Defense attorneys called the show of force "excessive." They argued—and I believe they're right—that while precautions were obviously required, the use of a small army served only to prejudice the community against the defendants. Indeed, people later told me, "The cops wouldn't use that much force unless those guys were really dangerous."

Once inside that courthouse, the defense got so angry that William Kunstler stepped awfully close to a contempt of court charge. He wanted to know why the prisoners had been held incommunicado. Promptly removed from Puerto Rico on Sunday morning, they had been helicoptered off the island and taken to an unknown location. Now, when they finally came to court, defense lawyers were being treated like an enemy. Weren't the defendants entitled to see their lawyers as soon as possible? Shouldn't they be permitted to prepare their defense?

Normally yes, but not in a political case. The legal rationale for the prisoners' treatment was a new, highly controversial provision of the bail and detention statutes. Passed into law on October 12, 1984, Section E said that "if the judicial officer finds that no condition or combination of conditions will reasonably assure the appearance of the person as required, and the safety of any other person and the community, he shall order the detention of the person prior to the trial." This legislation was drafted with organized crime in mind, and before detaining the person, a magistrate had to conduct a formal hearing. That was the purpose of the proceedings on September 3, but the treatment of the prisoners prior to this hearing was justified on the basis of their presumed threat to other people and to the community.

These people weren't criminals. They were, by the FBI's definition, terrorists. And only by a very loose interpretation of the statutes could they legitimately be denied the due process rights that any defendant supposedly had.

Kunstler didn't buy that loose interpretation for one second. And he and many of the other attorneys, among them Bruce Rubenstein, thought the case would ultimately go to the Supreme Court. But that was years away. Right now the reality was that not only were the prisoners not permitted to talk with their attorneys, they weren't even allowed to select the ones they wanted.

To Kunstler the government's motives were transparent. Prosecutors wanted to keep "political lawyers" out of the case. They would shamelessly use a broad political interpretation of the new detention statute to take away defendants' basic rights but would convict on the narrow robbery grounds if they could keep out lawyers who would inevitably raise the political issues that were the root cause of the robbery.

When Kunstler kept complaining, the judge told him to "sit down and let me finish." This interesting exchange took place as the judge addressed the next defendant.

THE COURT: Mr. Castro Ramos, I'm Judge Owen Egan and I'm the United States Marshall—Magistrate. Mr. Kunstler has got me going. I'm the United States . . ."
MR. KUNSTLER: Freudian slip, your honor.
THE COURT: It must be.

To Kunstler and his colleagues, the judge was a marshall who kept out not only threats to security but threats to the government's robbery case. The political lawyers wanted in, and when Judge Egan finally agreed to allow a Puerto Rican attorney ("Maybe three or four of them will know me") to stay in court as each defendant appeared, one after another the defendants chose lawyers who would keep politics where Kunstler and his colleagues said it belonged: at the center of the Wells Fargo case.

After all, the FBI had found Los Macheteros only because of surveillance mandated by politically motivated threats to the government of the United States. Why eliminate politics now that the defendants were finally in court?

By about 6 P.M., each defendant had a lawyer, and with luck they would be ready to begin the bail hearings scheduled for September 13. That was a later date than the law suggested, but the judge gave the defendants extra time because defense attorneys had to travel to Puerto Rico, interview witnesses, and get the important evidence back to Connecticut.

That process would take time, and it highlighted yet again the issue raised by Judge Justo Arenas. These people were being tried on alien soil. Nothing made that point better than an incident in Judge Egan's court. One of the Puerto Rican lawyers, Juan Acevedo, was walking back into the courtroom when one of the United States marshalls called him a "fucking Puerto Rican."

Holding his temper, Acevedo warned the marshalls, but when a colleague told Judge Egan, the appalled magistrate wanted to immediately reprimand the prejudiced police officer. Although that never happened—Acevedo couldn't identify the guy—the comment underlined the defendants' predicament: They had to explain Puerto Rican politics in a city where the agents of authority contemptuously called islanders names; and they had to do it with American political lawyers explaining Puerto Rican politics to a prejudiced Yankee population.

It was a tall order, which many independentistas thought no one could fill.

As the bail hearings wore on, a handful of the nineteen defendants did go free. In Jorge Farinacci's case it took nearly a half million dollars in secured funds because the government alleged that Farinacci played a central role in planning the robbery, but that was obviously a small price to pay for the chance to once again walk the streets.

The other defendants remained in jail, but with so much publicity and so many nationalists behind bars, the authorities expected some sort of retaliation from Los Macheteros. Days after the arrests, the group had threatened "to respond with great force" for each fighter arrested; on September 23 (the anniversary of the 1868 Lares insurrection) they had issued a public warning that "our martyrs [the defendants] show us the way with a rifle in one hand and a machete in the other"; and the cover of the December 1985 issue of the nationalist publication *Libertad* announced this bold promise: "The U.S. government is slowly filling their jails with the best of our patriots, but we warn them to begin preparing their cemeteries also, because we intend to fill them with their mercenaries."

Nothing happened, but not because Los Macheteros were demoralized, fatally weakened, or frightened. Nothing happened because the following questions were being debated within revolutionary circles: Is our first obligation to the defendants or to the independence movement? If we retaliate or if Victor speaks out, will that help the cause but harm the jailed patriots? Should we, through the use of force, produce the publicity that will, in the United States, adversely affect the plight of the imprisoned comrades?

For now, those urging restraint have won out. Only the October 28, 1986, bombings have occurred but if they do decide to use force, the defendants have seemingly unanimously offered their moral support. In a statement by those imprisoned (issued in December 1985), the defendants "expressed their revolutionary gratitude" for the applause of so many other Puerto Ricans. However, "your support is not for us alone. It is support for our people's right to freedom. It is support for the right of our people to fight for that freedom with any means within our grasp, and according to the dictates of our conscience." The Puerto Rican people should remain unified because independentistas "are paving the way for the future" and remember "that we revolutionaries have to seek support from each of them. Different forms and methods of struggle should not, cannot oppose each other. Each individual chooses the one he believes in. All together, until victory is won. Long live Free Puerto Rico."

Four months in jail had done nothing to weaken the revolutionary ardor of Los Macheteros. They still sought the support of the Puerto Rican masses, and to the astonishment of many Americans, they had it: or maybe not, depending on how you choose to read the results of a poll (on the following page) conducted in Puerto Rico by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White.

Like any poll, this one can be read in different ways. For example, there's no doubt that a bare majority of islanders think Los Macheteros are terrorists. And only 3 percent of the people wholeheartedly support their means and ends. But 41 percent of the population provides a solid base of support for Los Macheteros in particular and independence in general. Despite the fact that the actions in question include the deaths of American soldiers and the destruction of American airplanes, more than 40 percent of Puerto Ricans call the cause just and the methods, although extreme, not unacceptable.

That's what Los Macheteros were looking for. When Jorge Farinacci returned to Hartford in February 1986 for a number of speaking engagements, he understandably advertised the results of the Yankelovich poll. The FBI could say what it wants. For

"WHAT STATEMENT IS CLOSEST TO YOUR OPINION ABOUT LOS MACHETEROS?"

	Total	*Commonwealthers*	*Statehooders*	*Independentistas*
They are patriots whose goals justify their means.	3%	3%	0	18%
They have a patriotic cause but their actions are extreme.	41%	39%	18%	60%
They are terrorists whose goals and actions are unacceptable.	51%	53%	61%	11%

SOURCE: *El Nuevo Dia*, January 16, 1986.

Farinacci, the poll confirmed what he "felt" as he walked Puerto Rico's streets. The people were with him, and although this came as no surprise to Farinacci, it still moved this very intelligent, extremely passionate labor lawyer.

Moving from Spanish to English and back again, he pleaded Puerto Rico's case to the roughly one hundred people assembled at Hartford's YWCA. A majority were Puerto Ricans, but for the first time in my experience the audience also included a surprising number of Anglo activists. They'd come to express solidarity with the nationalists, and they listened attentively as Farinacci eloquently explained the tenor of his everyday life. Since the bugs were or could be everywhere, he and his family no longer discussed important issues in the house. If the children had a problem at school or he and his wife had a private matter to discuss, they went outside. No longer a sanctuary, their home had been turned into an FBI listening post. It was a lousy way to live.

The speech bred a bit of paranoia. Right after Farinacci spoke about the bugging, a nationalist came to where I was sitting, asked about my book, and as I answered his questions, he taped my responses without telling me. When I found out about it later, the contradiction bothered me, but it was perhaps inevitable. For all their bold statements, and even the surprising amount of public opinion in their favor, the arrests caused nationalists to see

microphones behind every tree or under every YWCA table. After August 30, nationalists didn't know who to trust. If their hesitation was both comprehensible and intelligent, it still kept a variety of potential supporters at a distance.

In the courtroom, beneath ceilings easily twenty feet high and within paneled walls that enclosed an area roughly 50 by 150 feet, the judge's desk sat on a platform about ten feet from the floor. The jurist looked down on the rest of us from a desk set against a wall painted bright gold and framed by a rose border sprinkled with gold stars. On either side of this star-studded display were rows of seats. One section would house the jury while, opposite them, the defendants and their lawyers sat in the "bleachers," three rows of twelve chairs each specially built—at a cost of $67,000—for the trial of Los Macheteros. With sixteen defendants and a minimum of sixteen lawyers to accommodate,* the preindictment courtroom would have been cramped and disorganized. Despite criticism ("It's meant to spotlight and humiliate the defendants," said one fellow), the new rows of chairs, connected to new tables, which all together formed three neatly stacked rows, were a sensible way to provide a comfortable setting in this soon-to-be-crowded courtroom.

Ruling this judicial chamber was Judge Emmet Claire. A little over seventy with snow-white hair and a polished, distinguished demeanor, this jurist took complete charge of *his* courtroom the moment he set foot in it. The rest of us got up to respond to his entry, and after the judge sat down, we followed his distinguished lead. After the judge opened the proceedings, the score of lawyers (there were always four for the prosecution, sometimes as many as eighteen for the defense) were one after another polite as polite could be. In a classroom I'd call it "buttering me up"; in a courtroom, it's proper demeanor.

Throughout the "discovery" stages of the proceedings, the judge was attentive, intelligent, and conscientious, and he displayed a good sense of humor. When one of the defense lawyers said his mail was being opened and read by the government and a prosecutor protested too vigorously ("We would never do that"), the judge, tongue in cheek, said, "We know. We know. You'd want to prosecute anyone guilty of such an act."

*Recall that Victor, and Norberto and Avelino Gonzalez Claudio, although indicted, have not been arrested.

Even when they were bad, the judge's jokes were a welcome pause in proceedings that, after ten months of litigation, had come full circle. On June 2, 1986, raising questions similar to those asked of Justo Arenas ten months earlier, the defense wanted a change of venue, asking Judge Claire to send the case back to Puerto Rico because that was the only place the alleged Macheteros had a reasonable chance of getting a fair trial.

To make its case, the defense presented a solid legal brief. Since "the center of the indictments" charged a conspiracy in Puerto Rico and the Sixth Amendment guaranteed a right to be tried in the district of the offense, the Constitution said to send the defendants home. And, if the Constitution wasn't ammunition enough, the defense brought in the Supreme Court, which had established a variety of factors for determining the legitimacy of a change of venue. For example, the defendants had a right to be tried in their own community, they had a right to be tried in the location of the events at issue (the conspiracy to rob Wells Fargo), and they had a right to lawyers who spoke their language, understood their culture, and were sympathetic to their proindependence views.

For hours on end, the defense offered a clearly reasoned, intelligent, legal case for the change of venue. But it was Attorney Michael Deutsch's use of sociology that furnished the best change-of-venue arguments the court would hear. Deutsch sent a representative sample of sixteen of the FBI's wiretap tapes to a nationally respected expert in sociolinguistics. When Professor William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania received the tapes ("which were of poor quality because of background noise, interference, and distance from the microphone"), he played them for six people who didn't speak Spanish and six Puerto Ricans who did. Not surprisingly, the six non-Spanish speakers heard only a "meaningless blur." And despite repeated attempts, even the Spanish-speaking subjects couldn't agree on what the tapes did or did not say. As Labov summed it up, "Judging from the sections of tape recordings I have heard, compared to the government's transcription of what was said on the tape recordings, there will be many arguments over what words were said and what the words mean."

Deutsch thought he'd hit a home run, because Labov's tests showed that when controversy about the key government evidence arose, even Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans would have

trouble deciding what was said. And if they'd have trouble, was it fair to ask an English-only jury in Hartford to decide the defendants' guilt or innocence based on evidence even native Puerto Ricans had trouble deciphering?

Judge Claire immediately got the point. But what about an objective translation? Wouldn't the court be able to hire someone who, lacking either a prosecution or defense bias, presented jurors with the actual words on the FBI's admittedly poor-quality tapes?

This was a good question that Labov answered with a resounding no. Important inflections in people's voices couldn't be determined by reading a transcript,* and neither could the cultural differences that made island Spanish unique. Labov thought (and a large body of scientific evidence supports his contention) that no one could provide an objective translation of the tapes, and without knowledge of Spanish, Labov worried that Hartford jurors would inevitably give too much credence to an attempted translation commissioned by the government. The defense argued that the best way for the court to assure as much objectivity as possible was to rely on native Puerto Rican jurors, because they at least would have some chance of deciding the meaning of hard-to-hear words.

The judge listened, and read, and tried to be open-minded. But he refused the change of venue because, as he saw it, the case narrowly revolved around a robbery in West Hartford, Connecticut. And whatever the case's sociological problems, to Judge Claire this was still nothing more than a robbery case that had occurred in his jurisdiction, would be tried in his courtroom, and would include, no matter how hard the defense lawyers tried, no discussion of Puerto Rican politics.

This conscientious judge had been doing his homework. He'd read Raymond Carr's recently published *Puerto Rico: The Colonial Experiment,* and he had no particular problem with establishing a new nation ("If they want independence give them independence"), but bringing politics into this case was out of the question. Judge Claire meant to try a robbery case, and to his mind, independence was a "red herring" that would never enter his courtroom.

Even if the judge manages to chase politics into the hallway,

*Think of an apology received in a tone of voice that indicates it's not an apology.

the prosecution and the FBI will bring them back in whenever they enter Judge Claire's domain. Recall that the legal justification for the FBI's surveillance stems from the political motivation of Los Macheteros (the Levi guidelines discussed in chapter 3) and, in a recent conversation with Special-Agent-in-Charge Lon Lacey and Dick Farley, the FBI agent in charge of the Hartford office, every time I brought up Puerto Rican history, they brought up Cuba, and looming behind that subject, the ominous specter of Communist influence on Los Macheteros.

If political motives don't matter, why keep mentioning Fidel Castro? And why, when one of the prosecutors cites the travels of a Machetero, skip four countries visited but mention Cuba and Nicaragua?

Of course political motives matter. And the judge, an obviously hardworking, concerned jurist, will have a heck of a time keeping the goals of Los Macheteros out of his courtroom.

This was and is a political case. And, given the biases that exist in Connecticut and in Puerto Rico, there can never be a completely objective analysis of the Wells Fargo robbery. Here or there, the defendants' fates will ultimately be decided, not on the basis of the government's substantial body of hard evidence, but on our political, cultural, and moral interpretation of that evidence.

"All" that happened when the courts finally settled the venue issue was that the judge made a definitive decision about which biases would prevail. And that completed the defendants' cultural railroading, because Hartford jurors may very well act, not like the eighteenth-century Rhode Islanders out to protect their own, but like the British out to hold on to their colonies. Connecticut is part of the mother country. And that's always a hard place for "disloyal" colonists to get a fair trial.

Meanwhile, as translators plough through the 1,300 reels of FBI wiretaps, defense lawyers prepare for a 1987 legal battle over the suppression of government evidence. They may partially win because federal agents did make a number of procedural "errors." For example, most of the tape recordings were sealed nearly three months later than federal rules require, and in some cases, agents taped personal conversations that federal rules explicitly prohibit recording.

In all likelihood, some government evidence will be suppressed, but given the prosecution's massive stockpile of tapes,

photos, and documents, a trial will be held, and according to all informed sources, it will include no bombshells or smoking guns. The essential story is already a matter of public record, because it came out in the bond hearings. The trial will focus on the defense's ability to outwit the prosecution, to discover legal mistakes, and to convince a Hartford jury that, like the behavior of their distant ancestors in 1776, revolutionary acts often require no condemnation or punishment.

While the legal battles continue and legal costs skyrocket—one estimate says the government has already spent $10 million—the defendants languish in jail. Indeed, even though the many congressmen who voted for the new, preventive detention legislation set ninety days as, in Senator Strom Thurmond's words, "the worst case limit" for preventive detention, the alleged Macheteros have already served more than ten months in jail, and with the trial slated to begin in mid-1987, they can look forward to nearly two years in prison before their trial even begins.

That's the longest period of preventive detention in American history.* And if it raises important constitutional questions for Americans, what about a group of Puerto Ricans who question the legitimacy of all American authority? Within our legal system, their incarceration may become a "landmark" case before the Supreme Court, but no matter what Americans do, Puerto Rican nationalists will still fundamentally question the right of the United States to monitor and control their lives.

Although the Wells Fargo case is significant, as are the legal and moral questions raised by the treatment of the prisoners, the bedrock issue is still the political status of the Puerto Rican people. What are we—Americans and Puerto Ricans together—going to do about a problem that first arose when the French, in the name of the Spanish, gave the Americans an island that belonged to the Puerto Ricans?

*On October 21, 1986, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit concluded that "the continued pretrial detention of these defendants . . . was unconstitutional." As of early December 1986, Judge Claire was setting bond for the nine men and women who had already spent fifteen months in jail awaiting trial.

12

Political Options

A POLICEMAN friend of mine assured me, "Victor's unhappy." Thinking he knew something, I anxiously asked, "How do you know? Have you got information from the FBI? From the CIA? Tell me."

He couldn't because he honestly had no hard information about Victor's everyday life. He wanted him to be unhappy—after all, crime is not supposed to pay—so he turned his wishes into fact. "Victor is sorry he did it."

I doubt that. In Cuba or elsewhere, he is in exile. And that has to be tough because it's hard for any feeling person to "forever" leave relatives and friends. But as a Puerto Rican nationalist, Victor followed models that go back at least 120 years. Emeterio Betances lived in exile before the Lares insurrection in 1868, many Puerto Rican nationalists lived in New York before the Spanish–American War of 1898, and, unable to accept American authority, some followers of Albizu Campos have lived in Cuba for the last forty years.

Victor may be lonely, but he's not alone. He can lean on 120 years of nationalism. And, even if he is caught, that deep well of support will remain in place as long as Puerto Rico remains "like a disembodied shade in an intermediate state of ambiguous existence."

Let's begin our analysis of political options with a story told by many Puerto Ricans. For years José owned a modest little snack shop and bar called the Sunrise. José one day decided to paint the shop a different color. Nothing special, just an attempt to spruce up the bar's worn and battered decor. But when he finished, José liked his handiwork so much he renamed the store: Now his freshly painted sign said, "The New Improved Sunrise." Of course, once you got past the shop's somewhat ambitious new title, it was still the same old snack bar, but the new coat of paint did fool those foolish enough to believe anything had changed.

Before and after, the Sunrise was the same. And so was Puerto Rico before and after the change to Commonwealth status. The Sunrise story appears, not in a Machetero polemic, but in a volume called *Statehood Is for the Poor,* written in 1973 by Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo.[1] The sarcastic little tale reflects a perception that cuts across all island political persuasions. Commonwealth status was nothing more than a fresh coat of paint. Call the island the unofficial fifty-first state if you want, but whatever the label, the reality never changes: In 1898, in 1952, and in 1986, Puerto Rico is still nothing more than an American colony.

Although this assessment unites all political parties, after that they move in very different directions. Everybody wants change for the better, but as our point of political departure, the New Progressive Party position will perhaps surprise the many Americans who have no knowledge of Puerto Rican public opinion.*

Begin with culture. Because "the first basic reality with which we must come to grips is that we have our own distinctive way of life." Our culture "is what defines us as a people; it is our Puerto Rican-ness itself . . . And we who are Puerto Rican are not about to give up our identity for anybody."

Whether here or on the island few people disagree with those admirable sentiments. The problem is how do you get a unique people who are passionately unwilling to be assimilated into the melting pot? Will the state of Puerto Rico be the only one to use Spanish in its courts and government offices? And if people can't everywhere use their native language, how do they preserve and nurture the cultural identity they won't give up for anybody?

Statehooders want something that is, at least on the face of it, sociologically impossible. They seek to be part of the *United* States of America, but only if, on the cultural level, they're separate, distinct, and unique.

Perhaps, as with the Amish in Pennsylvania, it will be possible for statehooders to square this cultural circle. But quite unlike the Amish or the Hutterites (in South Dakota), statehooders do not seek to isolate themselves from the American mainstream. On the contrary, Romero loves the United States so much that he welcomes its culture as he simultaneously asks for its money.

*This section is based on Romero's *Statehood Is for the Poor* and his more recent essay "Puerto Rico U.S.A.: The Case for Statehood," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Fall, 1980), 60–81. Since Romero was twice governor (from 1976 through 1984), it seems fair to use his writings as a mainline example of the philosophy of those who favor statehood.

"Just how does Puerto Rico stand today in comparison with the rest of the United States? . . . The bitter truth is that Puerto Rico today is even poorer than the very poorest of the fifty United States: Mississippi. And it is precisely because of this agonizing fact that I keep saying that no true Puerto Rican can stand idly by and tolerate a situation of that kind."[2] Puerto Rico should become a state, but instead of our Constitution or Bill of Rights, Romero wants in because of the federal funds statehood will send south of the border.

In a chapter entitled "The Phony Tax Monster," Romero tells readers not to worry about federal taxes because "were we a state our per capita contribution to the Federal treasury would come to less than that of any other state in the Union. At the same time the per capita benefits we'd reap from Federal Aid programs would be greater than those of any other state in the Union."

That's a good deal. Especially if one recalls that "one of the Puerto Rican government's grave handicaps under Commonwealth status is its near total dependence upon local tax revenues in its attempts to tackle the island is massive socio-economic problems." Because Puerto Rico's not a state, it's discriminated against in federal aid programs; once the island is America's fifty-first state, the floodgates of federal aid will finally open wide. In Romero's words, "Puerto Rico would be in a position to do a great deal more to overcome its internal difficulties if the Federal government's diverse variety of health, education, and welfare projects were readily available to our local authorities without any limitation whatsoever."[3]

Perhaps it's just politics. But Romero means to solve the dependency problem by embracing even more of the same, as he neglects to tell his own people the truth about the island's present share of federal assistance.

In mid-1986, net federal transfers totaled nearly 40 percent of the island's gross national product. And in certain aid programs, Puerto Rico does far better than every state in the Union. In fiscal 1984, the island got $814 million in food stamp assistance; no state is in three figures, and Puerto Rico's program is eight times larger than New York's and thirty-two times larger than that of Illinois. Puerto Rico receives seventy-two times more food stamps than Mississippi, which Puerto Rico also beat out in the following federal assistance programs: Economic Development, Compensatory Education for the Disadvantaged, Rural Water and Waste

Disposal, Child Nutrition Programs, Environmental Protection Agency Funds, and Family Social Services.[4]

Since, overall, Puerto Rico got more federal funds than sixteen of the United States,* it is incorrect to argue that Uncle Sam is forgetting his island relatives. It is true that statehood would make the island eligible for a variety of additional programs (especially in supplemental security income), and it is also true that on a per capita basis Puerto Ricans get much less federal money than any state, but they still get far more than the statehooders are willing to admit. Much more important, why root the desire for statehood in a demand for more federal funds?

In Romero's words, we'd get more tax benefits than any other state, and "on top of this we'd also have seven or eight Puerto Ricans serving as full voting members of Congress, working up in Washington at all times to help draft and pass new and improved social welfare legislation."

Romero pulls no punches at home (very different from his behavior in Washington) because the economic reality his island audience faces is one explanation for his decidedly monetary appeal. Today more and more Puerto Ricans are packed into the cities, and if they don't work for the government (roughly 40 percent of all employed did so in 1986), they're unemployed (roughly 25 percent of the labor force in 1986).[5] Either way, what's welfare for the United States is control for a political party and survival for the masses. Since Puerto Rico has the highest standard of living in the Caribbean, rather than shape policies that would offer hope of a self-sufficient future, it's easier for politicians to feed into people's fears as, with each passing year, the number of unemployed and marginally employed islanders increases.

Don't rock the boat, which could sink if Uncle Sam refused to keep it afloat! Statehood is survival. That's why many islanders vote for the flag and that's why politicians like Romero welcome increased dependency. With the collapse of the economic model of the 1940s, they don't know what to do. As President Reagan proudly stresses policies that move people to stand on their own two feet, think for themselves, and reduce reliance on federal

*They were: Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

funds, the Puerto Rican statehooders preach that poverty has a federally minted silver lining.

Again, in Romero's words, "what Puerto Rican statehood would actually mean, in terms of federal taxes, is that our poor wouldn't pay any taxes at all, while our middle class would pay a little and our wealthy would pay quite a bit, in order that poor people all over the country—but especially the lower and middle classes on the island—would receive more in the way of federal benefits."

What about the Populares, or Popular Democratic Party? Do the supporters of continued Commonwealth status have a program that offers, not only food for the belly, but self-respect—dignidad—for the spirit?

The answer is yes and no. They know what to do but with ultimate power in Washington they can't, nationalists argue, implement the policies that might turn things around.

Consider the "New Theses" of present Governor Rafael Hernandez Colon. Labeled an "historic initiative" when he first announced them in 1976, the New Theses are based on a very old idea: To solve its economic and social problems Puerto Rico must be allowed to achieve prosperity through self-sufficiency and "a progressive reduction of dependency on the mainland." Now that kind of talk naturally makes any conservative's heart beat faster except that, whenever specific issues are discussed, conservatives unite with liberals to refuse the changes Hernandez seeks.[6]

How about the power to levy their own tariffs so that islanders can encourage the import substitution that economists argue is essential to economic growth? What about altering wage rates or encouraging trade with other countries or allowing shipping on the many boats that are far less expensive than America's?

Each proposal makes economic sense, but all are rejected by Congress because they often threaten an American economic interest (e.g., the American merchant marine or the California rice growers who don't want to see Puerto Ricans grow their own) and always threaten the congressional powers that be.

At least, as they see it, the statehooders face reality. They don't pretend to want powers Washington will never concede. Whether in the old or the new Sunrise, statehooders note that "Congress' almost limitless mandate over the internal affairs of

Puerto Rico has its origins in the Federal Constitution." And if that's not authority enough, "under international law, as well, the Congress possesses total sovereignty over Puerto Rico, in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Paris."[7]

That is the truth, which the statehooders say they face but the Commonwealthers deny. Especially on the island, the Populares claim to have real power but every time they try to assert it, or even worse, Congress uses its almost limitless mandate, the Populares repeat their claims of power just before they board a plane bound for Washington. For example, shortly before the arrests of the Macheteros, Congress threatened to repeal the tax laws that exempt possessions corporations from federal taxation. Since these "you won't have to pay anything" statutes are the heart and soul of Fomento's economic program, island newspapers were soon filled with stories of Puerto Rico's imminent economic collapse. In one instance, the head of Fomento admitted that even talk of eliminating the tax benefits had hurt his efforts to attract new industry, and far more important, if the laws were actually repealed "then high-technology plants, including the pharmaceuticals, would leave the island and Puerto Rico would be forced to compete with other Caribbean islands for low-wage industry."

To forestall disaster, the Populares played politics, but not in Puerto Rico. They went to Washington and lobbied Congress for no tax changes. When they succeeded, newspaper columnists unintentionally mocked the Commonwealth governor they were trying to applaud. In a commentary on August 13, 1985, the *San Juan Star* first praised the governor for his pragmatism and then lauded him for his shrewdness. When he needed a friend in Washington, he didn't fool around. He hired Michael Deaver ("the ex-White House aide and Reagan confidante") and with "this most clever move," Hernandez showed how little power his government actually had. Brag as he might about islanders controlling their own destiny, when Congress laid down the law, the Populares governor tried to amend it by hiring the powerful Americans who actually control Puerto Rico's economic and political affairs. And when the Americans argued among themselves, who got humiliated in the middle? When Michael Deaver lobbied for Puerto Rico in Japan didn't Secretary of State Shultz assault the island's dignidad by telling Puerto Rico—via its middleman Deaver—that the island "does not have the authority on its own to negotiate or enter into international agreements"?

In response to such shrewd moves, another *Star* commentator said "forget 936 [the tax laws]." The root issue was to fashion a new economic model that would be "immune to the whims of Washingtonians out to grind axes." To have any hope of a decent future, Puerto Ricans "had to design and massively support some program founded upon a permanent and unalterable political status—a political status with which outside policymakers cannot capriciously tamper ever again."

That seems reasonable, because these tax debates simply repeat dialogues that are now almost one hundred years old. To a nationalist reading the record, it boils down to this: The Populares often know what to do, but given their own political and economic dependence on Washington, as well as to their fears about the military consequences of change ("Who will protect us?"), they would rather repeat the past than walk into an uncharted future.

To nationalists, independence—real, authentic independence—is the only answer to Puerto Rico's woes. "Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" because that is the cause of justice, and because it is the only way—short of total welfare dependence—the island can build an economy with some chance of providing long-term security married to self-sustaining prosperity.

Nationalists begin with the issue of justice. Americans took Puerto Rico. They went in with soldiers, declared martial law, and when the Spanish couldn't come up with the dollars, the Americans took "Little Puerto Rico" instead of cash. Those are the historical facts presented, not only by a cross section of professional historians but by Whitelaw Reid, who helped negotiate and write the Treaty of Paris. American historians do argue about why they took the island, but even when they contend that international law ultimately legitimated their country's many motives, American historians still agree that the United States used soldiers to violently confiscate a people and its homeland.

Nationalists argue that might does not make right. It only makes for contemporary Puerto Rico, an island controlled by a Congress that continually claims that it supports the right of all people to self-determination.

If that's so, then, nationalists say, give Puerto Rico back to the people who, by the higher laws of God (recall Juan Segarra's comment that American control is a crime against humanity),

actually own it. Puerto Rico rightfully belongs to the islanders who live there, and if Americans didn't need a plebiscite to take control in 1898, nationalists want to know why Puerto Ricans need one to get out in 1987?

To ask that question is to introduce justice to reality. The United States forcibly took Puerto Rico and, *if you start in 1898,* the facts support the contention of Los Macheteros that the United States has no legitimate authority in Puerto Rico.

But returning to the realities of power politics, there is now —sanctified by a treaty in which, nationalists are quick to point out, no Puerto Rican had a meaningful voice—an eighty-eight-year relationship between islanders and the government, the military (who own and control 13 percent of the island), and the corporations of the United States. Agreements have been signed, factories built, and federal funding liberally furnished. Those are realities that, when introduced to justice, tend to overwhelm it. As one of my police informants, who in this instance asked to remain anonymous, told me, "They may be right. But so what? America is there and we're not about to leave. If only because of strategic considerations we need Puerto Rico and they'll just have to live with that."

Maybe so. But Americans have a long tradition, not only of supporting just causes, but of supporting people who refuse to accept many long years of institutionalized power. "Think," one nationalist told me, "of yourselves and the British."

The United States took Puerto Rico as a prize of war. And nationalists argue that, in the name of justice, we should immediately give back what we had no right to take. As Jefferson put it in the original draft of America's Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent. . . ."[8]

To nationalists justice is first. The economy is second. Right after the United States took over, Puerto Rico became utterly dependent on its new master, and Operation Bootstrap, instead of providing the economic base needed for self-sustaining growth, has produced only more unemployment, linked to the need for the debilitating use of food stamps.

Puerto Ricans must be free to develop their own economy because, as Jane Jacobs notes in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations,* "development is a do-it-yourself process." The fundamental error of Operation Bootstrap was that instead of seeing develop-

ment as a process of change, people like Muñoz Marin saw it as "a collection of things for producing." Bring in those American factories and jobs, like magic, would appear.

Not so. Import substitution and replacement are at the root of all economic expansion, and they occur when people in the process of change take a product, such as rice or clothing, and substitute their own production for the goods offered by others. Substitution produces jobs, which produce a market for new imports along with the chance for other native producers to furnish the goods and services needed by the locals actively engaged in replacing and substituting imports.

To get this process moving, an economy—especially an island economy—must be free to manage its own destiny (for example, the ability to set tariffs or the ability to create and control an industrial policy) and if it wants to succeed, it must focus on trade with nations at its own level and stage of development. Statehooders, for example, tell anyone willing to listen that independence might mean loss of the largest, most bountiful market in the world. What would happen if islanders stopped relying on the United States?

Without closing their eyes to the enormous difficulties involved, independentistas say they just might succeed. Because, if replacing imports is at the root of all economic growth, when any small island like Puerto Rico trades with an industrial giant like the United States, "The gulf between what they import and what they can replace with their own production is too great to be bridged."[9] The Bible notwithstanding, Goliath usually crushes David. To have a serious chance for self-sustaining growth, Puerto Rico must trade primarily with nations at its own level and stage of development. It must look not to the United States or Japan but to the other islands in the Caribbean and to the many small nations in Central and South America.

Puerto Rico has a chance to successfully compete with those economies, but only if the island is free to determine its political and thus its economic affairs.

Otherwise, as with beer, islanders will step up to the counter, and, instead of asking for a Corona (a Puerto Rican brand), they will, as they do today all over the island, ask for "un Bud"(weiser).

If independence is the cause of justice and self-sufficiency, why doesn't it succeed at the polls? Why does PIP (the Puerto Rican Independence Party) manage only 5 or 6 percent of the vote?

Nationalists and statehooders and Populares say this question is based on an incorrect assumption: That the election results accurately reflect how people feel about the status issue. When opponents put down the nationalists, they point to their low percentage of the vote, even though analysts agree that the elections do not fairly judge sentiment about political status. As Romero Barcelo put it in *Statehood Is for the Poor,* "The results of the general elections held every four years hinge on a great many issues, most of which have little or no direct bearing on the ultimate resolution of Puerto Rico's political status question."[10]

Nobody knows what Puerto Ricans actually feel about political status, and a plebiscite held tomorrow would offer no genuine answer because "for the people of Puerto Rico to exercise their right of self-determination fully and properly, any plebiscite giving full weight to all status alternatives cannot be the starting point but rather the end result of a previously developed political and economic strategy that gives meaning and substance to the various status choices."[11]

High in the Puerto Rican mountains, I sat one afternoon with a fellow who flew the Commonwealth flag over his house. This gentle man loved his country, and he adored the mountains, but he resisted the nationalists because "we'll never get a chance to raise our flag." Declare independence and another United States would come in and take over the island. Without assurances of continued security, which could only come after a detailed strategy had been prepared, this man opted for the status quo.

Puerto Rico needs to openly debate its options so that when and if a plebiscite is held, the people know exactly what is and what is not at stake. After eighty-eight years of American colonialism, to opt for one status or the other without knowing what will happen to, for example, social security payments, citizenship, or military installations is to walk into a dark room with no chance of turning on the lights.

Puerto Ricans need to make status the number one issue of their lives because, until and unless they do, the conditions that today concern people—crime, unemployment, housing, alcohol —will not only never be resolved, they will, in all likelihood, only worsen.

In the United States, we can begin to accept primary responsibility for the last eighty-eight years of the island's existence. Contemporary Puerto Rico is an American creation, and in a country

that recently grandly celebrated the Statue of Liberty, we can certainly empathize with groups who also seek what we so proudly and rightfully claim for ourselves.

What Americans finally do must be the fruit of a national debate I hope this book helps spark. Because the Philippines are today in the news, because they were, like Puerto Rico, a prize of the Spanish-American War, and because we did give them freedom, let us remember what selfish terms of separation can help produce. When the Philippines desired independence after World War II, we refused to set them free until they first gave American business interests the same property rights as those run by Filippinos. Initially Philippine leaders said no, but we brought them around with this technique: Congress put a $500 ceiling on the expenditure of postwar rehabilitation claims until and unless the Filipinos gave in to American business interests.[12] The Philippines never got a chance to develop a viable economy, which is one major reason corrupt Filipinos still dip their hands into the pockets of American taxpayers.

Let's not repeat history. Let's treat Puerto Ricans with the same generosity we would have wanted from the British. The choice is ours. How we make it will say a great deal about the actual meaning of the word American.

As Americans ponder and debate, Los Macheteros (and FARP and the Organization of Volunteers and the FALN) remain committed to change. They will not disappear until the status issue is definitively resolved, and they will not wait for Americans to indifferently deliberate their future. Los Macheteros will act. The unknowns are how, when, and with what impact on American and Puerto Rican public opinion.

Since many Macheteros believe that violence works ("Cause the Americans enough trouble and they'll eventually leave" or "The Yankees only listen when we force them to"), some retaliation for the treatment of the "Hartford Sixteen"* must be expected. And if Americans, instead of putting the actions of Los Macheteros in social and historical perspective, simply label them terrorists, that will undoubtedly increase tension here and on the island. Handled badly, it could go something like this: Los Macheteros act, we react, they act again, and we react by once

*Recall that Victor, and Avelino and Norberto Gonzalez Claudio have not been arrested.

again tightening the screws with stricter enforcement of the laws. That cycle is already eighty-eight years old, and if history teaches us nothing else, it shows that whether in the 1930s or the 1980s, arrested nationalists become heroes to most islanders and role models to the few who actively pursue revolution.

This time Americans should listen, because this time the threats come from people with substantial grounding in revolutionary strategy and tactics. Indeed, in sharp contrast to Albizu Campos and his followers, Los Macheteros and the other militant nationalist organizations are disciplined, dedicated, and very efficient groups of revolutionaries. They will act; and if they hurt things rather than people, Los Macheteros can eventually win over the Puerto Rican masses. *Islanders cherish their nationalists.* They esteem compañeros who stand up for Puerto Rico, and if Americans, instead of respecting that passion, stamp on the dignidad of islanders by disregarding their laws and values, we will create an even larger army of revolutionaries, protected by colonists who deeply resent the mother country.

In one form or another, Los Macheteros will not go away. They are with us until the status issue is resolved, and even then, they may continue to fight, if instead of becoming a nation, Puerto Rico is turned into a state.

It's not a pretty picture. But it is the one that American leaders have painted.

NOTES

1. Carlos Romero Barcelo, *La Estadidad es para los Pobres* (San Juan, 1978).
2. Ibid., 36.
3. Ibid., chapter 10, especially 85–86.
4. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Federal Expenditures by State for Fiscal Year 1984*, Washington, D.C.
5. See Frank Bonilla and Ricardo Campos, "Up by the Bootstraps: Ideologies of Social Levitation," *Cimarron* Vol. 1 (1985).
6. See, for example, Raymond Carr, *Puerto Rico* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), especially 123–25.
7. Romero Barcelo, *Statehood*, 98.
8. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1953), 53–63.
9. Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), especially chapter 10.
10. Romero Barcelo, *Statehood*, 104.
11. Jorge Heine, "Introduction," in *Time For Decision: The United States and Puerto Rico* (Lanham: North South Publishing Company, 1983), xxxv.
12. Theodore Friend, *Between Two Empires: Ordeal of the Philippines, 1929–1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), especially 258–63.

EPILOGUE: *In Jail*

COMING down on the train, my mind had conjured up a dark, dingy, dirty building, staffed by beer-bellied guards who gruffly herded prisoners about like so many walking slabs of beef. Prison scared me, because in a society that relishes freedom, this institution legitimately takes it away. Maybe, I asked myself, once the guards let me in, would they let me out?

I didn't have to worry. The real trick was to get *into* a building that mirrored none of my stereotypes. MCC (the Metropolitan Correctional Center) is a federal facility on the tip of Manhattan, an eleven-story building that looks and functions like a well-constructed metal file cabinet.

As you walk by a shotgun-toting guard, you pass through a glass entrance fit for any office building in the United States. Inside, the floors are spotless and the cinder-block walls freshly painted. In an attempt to humanize modern architecture, someone has put a plastic plant near the plastic seats that are beside the plastic and formica reception desk.

Doors flank either side of this horseshoe desk. As I waited for the trim, inspection-perfect guard to finish other business, I watched people try to open those doors, which was impossible, because the guard was the only one with access to the open-sesame button. A group of FBI agents had finished touring the facility and wanted to leave. Each agent took out his wallet, pressed his photo ID to the transparent glass, and allowed Guard Rosa to compare the picture and the person. Only after the guard had checked all of them, did they get into the lobby guarded by the fellow with the shotgun.

The FBI came out of one door. Press visitors like me or lawyers went in through another. You stated your business. If the reception guard had you on his list, he pressed you in. In another lobby walled in by more glass and another locked door, you take everything out of your pockets because the guard will scan your body with two different metal detectors. No foreign substance

went upstairs, and anything even potentially hazardous stayed with the guard. On one trip, my wife had left a nail file in my briefcase, and after a suspicious look or two, the guard sternly told me I could have it and my own nail clipper back when I left.

Before you get to the elevators, behind the second locked door, you must get stamped. It's the same procedure used in an amusement park, except that there's nothing funny about this particular routine. You won't get near the door much less the elevators without it because if the green mark is a visitor's stamp of approval, it's another pair of handcuffs to any prisoner. I could change clothes with a fellow but, without the green mark (which is checked on the way out) he'd never get out of the second lobby.

You're now through the second locked door and at the elevators, which have up and down buttons that don't work when you press them. A switchboard operator controls where you get off. Then from a hallway with another locked door, you get buzzed into an anteroom, where before the well-armed guard calls for someone to open the last locked door to the interview room, he checks your hand for the green mark. For as long as you're there, the guard sits outside, listening if he wants, but watching because he must.

On an average day MCC contains eight hundred prisoners, although only forty to sixty are thought to need maximum security attention. Murderers, bombers, organized crime figures: Prison officials analyze their records before they enter the facility, and "high risk" cases are locked up in special housing units, regulated by special dos and don'ts. Maximum security prisoners are not allowed to mix with the general population, nor to attend the religious services held on the fifth floor, nor to use the well-stocked law library on the third floor, nor to meet with their attorneys in the more relaxed rooms reserved for other criminals.

Although all maximum security prisoners get this special attention, the label assigned to the nine alleged Macheteros is "maximum security requiring special procedures." As MCC's attorney explained the label to Judge Emmet Claire in a hearing held on June 3, 1986, prison officials felt that given the defendants' alleged political activities, they required the highest degree of security MCC could manage. So in addition to the guard with the shotgun, and the two lobbies, and the green stamp, and the centrally controlled elevators, and the special, segregated housing units used by all maximum security prisoners, MCC tacks on additional regulations for the politically dangerous Puerto Ricans.

They stay in their cells for twenty-two to twenty-three hours a day. They're let out to "recreate," but showers, doing their laundry, and waiting in line to use the phone are considered part of their recreational activities. They have not been permitted to attend mass or go to confession. They are not permitted to use the meeting rooms on the third floor, although MCC has let maximum security crime figures charged with murder use them. Other husbands and wives in maximum security have been permitted private visits with one another, but not Juan Segarra and Luz Berrios Berrios. Other husbands and wives in maximum security have been permitted to see their children but not Juan Segarra and Luz Berrios Berrios.

Commenting on these conditions, the United States Court of Appeals said that "the conditions of confinement cannot be characterized as mild." In fact, they are as severe as the prison can make them. Correctly or incorrectly, the defendants are being treated differently because of their political beliefs and activities. Indeed, to say that this is not a political case, on which the authorities have already reached a guilty verdict, is to deny MCC's publicly stated reason (that is, police records of revolutionary activity) for the incredibly secure manner in which these defendants are contained every day.

Oddly, as much as the prosecution begs the political question, the defendants eagerly embrace it. They are proud to be independentistas and even prouder to be Puerto Ricans. In an interview, Filiberto Ojeda Rios told this story with a fondness and longing that openly expose his deepest passions. He was ten years old when, in 1943, his family migrated to New York City. He attended P.S. 48 where he received an assignment to write a composition about his "Most Unforgettable Night." Ojeda wrote about Three Kings Eve, happily explaining how he would fill a box with straw, set it outside, and then, "too excited to sleep," wait for the presents brought by the Three Kings.

Aware of the irony, Ojeda laughingly went on to explain that his essay won the prize for the best composition in the class, but as he related this forty-year-old story, I couldn't help remembering a comment made by, of all people, the former statehood governor of Puerto Rico, Carlos Romero Barcelo. In his essay advocating statehood, Romero Barcelo said that, "regardless of

what differences we may have over how Puerto Rico should ultimately resolve its political status dilemma, all Puerto Ricans want to see our culture preserved and nurtured. Our culture is what defines us as a people", and, no matter what the Americans do, "our language and culture are not negotiable."

Not for Romero Barcelo, and not for Ojeda Rios, because no matter how high the political barriers that separate them, statehooders understand and approve of the independentistas' love for their country and their culture. You can't feign that kind of passion. And you won't kill it no matter how many people go to jail for a robbery whose deepest roots lay in a people's desire to preserve their culture as they regain their national freedom.

Puerto Rico is an eighty-eight-year-old American dilemma neatly summed up by the Wells Fargo robbery. Despite the government's body of hard evidence, it is still possible to argue that American behavior and history demand a not-guilty verdict.

If the Reagan administration can deny the legitimacy of international law when the World Court condemns American behavior in Nicaragua, why can't Puerto Ricans deny the legitimacy of the international Treaty of Paris, the cornerstone of federal authority in Puerto Rico?

And if American history books applaud the "Mohawks" who challenged British authority by dumping tea into Boston harbor, how can we condemn Los Macheteros, who similarly challenge our colonial authority?

These are not easy questions. But we must answer them definitively, for the sake of justice to Victor and the other Wells Fargo defendants, and for our own sakes as well. Because Puerto Rico is a bomb waiting to explode.

APPENDIX: *Summary of Incidents Claimed by Los Macheteros*

August 25, 1978. The group announces its existence by taking credit for an attack on two Puerto Rican police officers. One is killed, the other kidnapped but later released unharmed. The attack is in retaliation for the murder of the two independentistas at Cerro Maravilla in July 1978.

October 2, 1978. A storage warehouse is robbed and the following explosives procured: dynamite cartridges, 500 pounds of ammonium nitrate, 988 blasting caps, and 17,500 feet of primacord. Los Macheteros claim responsibility for this action, along with the Organization of Volunteers for the Puerto Rican Revolution.

September, 1979. Along with FARP, the Volunteers, and the FALN, Los Macheteros announce that all the groups are working together and that they "will fight until final victory is achieved over imperialism and the traitors who serve it."

October 17, 1979. Macheteros participate, along with the other revolutionary groups, in a series of eight bomb attacks against United States government facilities located in Puerto Rico.

December 3, 1979. In retaliation for the murder of Angel Rodriguez in a Tallahassee prison, Los Macheteros open fire on a Navy bus in Sebana Seca, Puerto Rico. Two sailors are killed and nine injured.

March 13, 1980. Los Macheteros claim responsibility for an attack on a United States Army ROTC vehicle transporting three officers to the University of Puerto Rico.

January 12, 1981. Los Macheteros claim credit for the destruction of nine National Guard planes at Muñoz Airport, with estimated damages of $50 million.

April 21, 1981. Los Macheteros claim credit for a Wells Fargo Robbery in Santurce, Puerto Rico. The amount taken totaled $348,000.

November 11 and November 27, 1981. Los Macheteros claim responsibility for bomb attacks at the Puerto Rican Electrical Power Authority substations in Santurce, Puerto Rico.

May 16, 1982. In retaliation for United States Navy operations on Vieques (Ocean Venture, 1982), Los Macheteros attack sailors returning to their ship, the *Pensacola,* in Old San Juan Harbor. One sailor is killed and three wounded.

May 19, 1982. Because 350 squatter families were forcibly evicted by the Puerto Rican police from Villa Sin Miedo (Village Without Fear) in Carolina, Puerto Rico, Los Macheteros fire on the police, killing one officer and injuring twelve others. Before the attack, Los Macheteros had sent the governor a letter announcing that they would "take action" if the squatters were removed.

May 20, 1982. In an attempted action that has been attributed to Los Macheteros by the FBI, a switchboard operator at the Caribe Hilton Hotel receives a warning that four bombs have been placed in the hotel. Four plastic containers were found, but the bombs failed to explode "because the mechanical initiator didn't function properly."

September 1, 1982. In another action attributed to Los Macheteros by the FBI, the group tries but fails to rob a Wells Fargo armored truck en route from San Juan to Naranjito, Puerto Rico.

September 12, 1983. The group successfully takes $7.1 million from a Wells Fargo depot in West Hartford, Connecticut. This is the first incident outside of Puerto Rico.

October 30, 1983. A rocket is fired by Los Macheteros at the United States Courthouse in Hato Rey, Puerto Rico.

January 6, 1985. Los Macheteros give away toys in Hartford, Connecticut, and in two Puerto Rican locations.

January 23, 1985. Los Macheteros fire a rocket at the United States Courthouse in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico. This action was a joint operation with the Organization of Volunteers, "in memory of the late Juan Antonio Corretjer, who spent his life fighting against "Yankee imperialism."

October 28, 1986. Los Macheteros claimed credit for two bomb blasts directed at military installations on Puerto Rico. Los Macheteros acted in conjunction with FARP and the Organization of Volunteers. The aim of the bombing was to protest the possible training of Nicaraguan Contras on Puerto Rican soil and the beginning of commercial logging in *El Yunque,* the Puerto Rican National Rain Forest.